

“The University Works Because We Do”: University Decision-Making and Rhetorics of
Graduate Labor

by

Jonathan S. Isaac

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The Dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Associate Professor, English

Christa Olson, Professor, English

Morris Young, Professor, English

Robert Asen, Professor, Communication Arts

Jenell Johnson, Associate Professor, Communication Arts

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes how rhetorics of graduate labor clash with and condition rhetorical activity concerning university decision-making. I examine the rhetorical tactics by which graduate worker-organizers promote an explicit worker identity that invests graduate workers with agency in decision-making over their working conditions; I also identify how administrators and state legislators circulate discourses of university decision-making that flatten power differentials and exclude graduate workers from decision-making *as workers*. This project interrogates how identification with one's location in the class structure, overtly or otherwise, shapes the rhetorical activity of those with a stake in workplace decision-making: in this case, not only graduate workers and administrators, but also governing boards, faculty, undergraduate students, and state legislators. In so doing, I demonstrate that the ongoing rhetorical contest over how, exactly, to categorize graduate workers—as students or apprentices, professors-in-training or workers—is fundamentally a contest over the right of graduate workers to wield power through participation in workplace decision-making.

Chapter One, “Deliberating Decision-Making Power and the Rhetoric of Graduate Labor,” argues that graduate worker rhetorics represent a key site of disruption to dominant rhetorics of decision-making that circulate in the university and the broader public. In particular, this chapter contends that graduate student workers occupy a liminal space that exceeds administrators' most common discursive efforts to pin them down as primarily students or apprentices. Moreover, I argue that graduate student workers' experiences—of labor exploitation, power asymmetries, workplace discrimination, low wages, exclusion from decision-making, and more—name dynamics that undermine efforts by legislators, administrators, and governing boards to legitimize their own authority to near-singularly determine the best interests

of graduate workers specifically, and the university more broadly. In other words, this chapter investigates how the label of “graduate worker” presents discursive and material opportunities, otherwise unavailable to faculty or undergraduate student subjects, to expose and disrupt the administrative and managerial logics that set the rhetorical boundaries of the university—what can or cannot be said, done, or enacted in the officially-sanctioned spaces of the university.

Chapter Two, “Defining Graduate Workers as Decision-Makers in the TAA’s 1970 Unionization Campaign,” draws from TAA newsletters and other communications during the union’s formation and certification campaign of 1969 and 1970 to investigate the formation of a counterpublic explicitly attentive to the class dynamics of the university system writ large and the role of the graduate student worker within it. This chapter examines how the TAA rhetorically constructed its investment in and advocacy for more dispersed decision-making processes at UW–Madison. I demonstrate how the TAA utilized class-conscious rhetoric to articulate a new definition of graduate student labor, revealing the latent normative commitments that graduate student workers and academic workers must consciously and deliberately problematize.

Chapters Three and Four examine a campaign fifty years later in which the union struggled to connect the experiences of graduate workers to larger political interests and pressures in ways that would inform their self-perception as workers and prepare them and their allies to confront administrators directly over decision-making powers. Chapter Three, “Constructing the Graduate Worker in the Neoliberal University,” examines how TAA organizers structured the participation of graduate workers in protest against student fees, a revenue stream critical to the interpellation of students into neoliberal political rationality. I argue that the union’s failure to engage in anti-neoliberal consciousness-raising constrained its

ability to prepare graduate workers to take more disruptive collective labor action. In the absence of discourses connecting personal feelings of injustice to larger political interests and trends in the university, the union struggled to cohere a working-class counterpublic that could withstand misinformation, rhetorical obfuscation, stalling tactics, and anti-labor action that university administrators have demonstrated willingness to take.

Chapter Four, “Shared Governance as Rhetorical *Topos* and Asymmetries of Meaning in Deliberative Arenas,” analyzes how worker-organizers in the TAA attempted to write themselves into decision-making powers over student fees through participation in a Faculty Senate meeting, in the process misidentifying it as a discursive arena wherein workers could meaningfully challenge administrative decision-making even as amendments to state law had severely weakened faculty and student power over shared governance. The chapter accounts for how asymmetrical class power makes possible a sort of administrative double-speak that simultaneously champions shared governance practices and consolidates decision-making power among unaccountable administrators and state actors.

Taken together, this project examines the rhetorical contestation over the definition of graduate labor as it relates to workplace decision-making. The three case studies highlight how the rhetorics of graduate labor shape and are shaped by the interplay between political economic conditions, institutional priorities, and workers in motion. Through it all, I trace how graduate workers are defined by powerful institutional actors, as well as how graduate workers define themselves. By illuminating decision-making as an essential feature of the ongoing contestation between academic workers and university administrators, this dissertation urges the academic labor movement and everyone with a stake in higher education to think clearly and seriously about how universities make decisions, and in whose interests.

Prologue

As a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin, I spent the overwhelming majority of my time in union meetings. Alongside other members of the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), the graduate worker union at Wisconsin, I helped make decisions both with and on behalf of graduate workers at the university. As a rank-and-file member during my first two years at Wisconsin, I was grateful that forums existed within the union where it felt like my voice was heard and taken into account in organizing efforts. As the union's elected Treasurer for the next two years, however, I quickly realized how fatiguing democratic decision-making could be, how seductive it was to rationalize decisions made without significant member input as part of the responsibility of elected officers. This was especially the case when circumstances required nimble decision-making, as with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice uprisings in 2020. To be sure, I made mistakes in my organizing, including moments where I spoke on behalf of graduate workers who did not feel heard or accurately represented by me. These missteps humbled me and provided opportunities to reflect on my own shortcomings as a unionist committed to participatory decision-making and inclusive union spaces. Still, I took seriously as an organizer my responsibility to bring as many people as I could *into* conversations; doing so made democracy more than just an empty slogan for me and other graduate workers. On the whole, I look back on my five years organizing with the TAA as the most rewarding part of the "curriculum" at Wisconsin. I learned from and was inspired by so many incredible colleagues and comrades who will forever remain with me.

I have felt this same tension between democratic and consolidated decision-making all throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as I have watched the perspectives of university

administrators overwhelm faculty, student, worker, and community input in decisions about public health and safety. On principle, my solidarity remained with faculty, students, workers, and community members. These are people I had organized alongside who had little to no input in university decision-making and who had to make difficult decisions about their own health and the health of those around them. They were the unfortunate inheritors of a decades-long decay in practices of decision-making power-sharing at the university level, a decay that has largely benefited administrators, boards of governors, and legislators. At the same time, having served as an elected leader for the TAA and having rubbed shoulders with many kind administrators during my time at Wisconsin, I felt sympathy toward individuals who served in administrative roles that necessitated they make quick decisions to protect the operational health of specific facets of the university, even as I disagreed with how those decisions were being made and in whose interests.

I admit these messy sympathies here to foreground that the aim of this project is not entirely to castigate individual actors, but predominantly to analyze and critique the political structures, neoliberal logics, and classed discourses that exclude certain populations from meaningful decision-making powers and suppress class consciousness among academic workers, particularly graduate workers. I remain, at heart, a proud unionist committed to transforming unjust institutions.

Chapter One

Deliberating Decision-Making Power and the Rhetorics of Graduate Labor

As I drafted this introduction in late summer 2021, the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus was forcing another round of decisions concerning conditions for the return to in-person schooling. Instructors at colleges and universities across the country were looking around and taking stock of their lot. In almost every case, they did not like what they saw. Some found that their universities would not be requiring vaccines or masks for students. Others found that administrators would not approve remote work arrangements for immunocompromised instructors or staff.¹ Still others saw that college football games on their campuses would be held at full capacity and would not require proof of vaccination.² Some who refused to teach in-person without a mask mandate were terminated—including at least one tenured faculty member—while some (publicly) quit.³ As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor forcefully argued in recognition of academic workers' growing powerlessness, "There are better or worse jobs, some

¹ Elizabeth Redden, "Cornell Won't Approve Disability-Related Requests to Teach Online," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/13/cornell-wont-approve-disability-related-requests-teach-online>.

² Mark Wogenrich, "Penn State Will Not Require Football Fans to Prove They're Vaccinated," *Sports Illustrated*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.si.com/college/pennstate/football/penn-state-will-not-require-football-fans-to-prove-they-are-vaccinated>.

³ Colleen Flaherty, "Professor Fired for Refusing to Teach in a Classroom with No Mask Mandate," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/25/professor-fired-refusing-teach-classroom-no-mask-mandate>; Nora-Kathleen Berryhill, "Remote Teaching Request Lands Edgewood Professor's Contract 'Null and Void,'" *On The Edge News*, September 1, 2021, <https://otenews.com/remote-teaching-request-lands-edgewood-professors-contract-null-and-void/>; Colleen Flaherty, "Seeing Themselves Out," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/24/more-professors-quit-over-face-face-teaching-mandates>.

with more resources than others, but the pandemic has been leveling. We are workers and our employers do not care what we think, what we fear, or how we get through the day.”⁴

But in a handful of places, academic workers acted collectively to contest their institutions’ pandemic-related decisions. Faculty members at Spelman College refused to teach in-person, instead moving their classes online.⁵ At Northern Illinois University, the union representing tenured and tenure-track faculty announced that they had successfully negotiated with university administrators on safety measures that would determine whether in-person classes would be moved online. Kerry Ferris, a sociology professor at NIU and president of the faculty union, noted, “All we want is for people to be able to make the choices that allow them to feel safe...This is a lesson in the importance of collective action.”⁶ And graduate workers at the University of Michigan went on strike for nine days, both contesting their administration’s plans for reopening and raising anti-police demands connected to that summer’s racial justice uprisings; their strike spread to undergraduate housing and dining hall workers, even as the university sought to suppress the strike through legal sanctioning.⁷ While local conditions determined the extent to which academic workers secured concessions from administrators, and

⁴ Raychel Gadson, “‘There’s No There There’: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on the Future of the Left,” *Public Books*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.publicbooks.org/theres-no-there-there-keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-on-the-future-of-the-left/>.

⁵ Orion Rummel, “‘Black Women Being Trailblazers’: Spelman Faculty Refuse to Teach in Person as Classes Begin,” *The 19th*, August 19, 2021, <https://19thnews.org/2021/08/spelman-faculty-refuse-to-teach-in-person/>.

⁶ Colleen Flaherty, “Faculty and Administration Decide When to Go Remote,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/20/faculty-and-administration-decide-when-go-remote>.

⁷ Caroline Llanes, “U of M Files Unfair Labor Practice Charge against Graduate Student Employee Union,” Michigan Radio, September 12, 2020, <https://www.michiganradio.org/education/2020-09-12/u-of-m-files-unfair-labor-practice-charge-against-graduate-student-employee-union>.

though many still had to work under less-than-safe conditions, these cases speak to the role of workplace organization and action in influencing the decision-making of American universities.

While many of the exigencies brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are unique to this moment in time, the issues of how and in whose interests decisions are made in the American university are not new. For over a century, university faculty have organized to establish and preserve rights to determine and uphold academic standards, in addition to workplace protections; they have organized into professional associations, like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) founded in 1915, and into labor unions, like the American Federation of Teachers, whose first higher education local was founded at Howard University in 1918.⁸ For graduate student workers, the ability to secure workplace protections against discrimination and improvements in their working conditions has come almost exclusively through a fifty-year history of labor organizing, specifically through the pursuit of collectively-bargained contracts. On the whole, labor organizing has contributed to improvements in the welfare of graduate employees, including health care benefits, increased wages, and protections from discrimination and workplace harassment.

Even so, graduate employee unionization efforts have been met with resistance from faculty members, university administrators, and even other graduate workers for varied,

⁸ The AAUP from its origin identified itself *against* trade unionism. As John Dewey articulated, in an introductory address at the founding of the AAUP, “The fear that a ‘trade unionism’ of spirit will be cultivated is ungrounded. I have great respect for trade unions and what they accomplish. . . .But the term trades unionism has been used to suggest a fear that we are likely to subordinate our proper educational activities to selfish and monetary considerations.” For more on the tensions in the AAUP between professionalism and unionization, see Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, “Disenchanted Professionals: The Politics of Faculty Governance in the Neoliberal Academy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 1 (March 2017). Timothy Reese Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 112, no. 3 (March 2010), 884.

complicated reasons. Rhetorically, university administrations have frequently deployed discursive strategies that cast doubt on graduate workers' claims to worker-ness by classifying them as something *other than* workers—like students first, or apprentices, or participants in a mentor-mentee relationship, or professors-in-training—in order to discredit their legal claims to union representation and decision-making participation.⁹ Understandings of the nature of graduate labor, compositionist Marc Bousquet argues, are “continuously under active erasure” by administrative attempts to influence public perception about how universities work.¹⁰ In a 2018 unionization campaign, for example, Columbia University administrators justified their refusal to bargain with graduate workers' legally-recognized union by insisting in a public statement that “the relationship of graduate students to the faculty that instruct them must not be reduced to ordinary terms of employment.”¹¹ In response, and as I explore further in Chapter Two, graduate employee unionization efforts have sought to cultivate among graduate employees a collective *worker* identity that invites a structural understanding of the university labor system and that names graduate labor exploitation as foundational to the university's ongoing functioning. As I argue in this dissertation, identifying graduate student workers *as workers* both complicates public understandings of the university labor system and promotes the possibility of collective

⁹ One effect of unionization efforts is that graduate workers have exposed the ways in which university administrations act like corporations when faced with union campaigns; beyond muddying their claims to worker-ness, administrations have, for example, hired union-busting law firms, threatened legal action, not renewed work appointments, threatened to withdraw letters of recommendation, and more. For more examples of the tactics universities rely on to discredit legal claims to union representation for graduate employees, see: Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 30-31; Joel Westheimer, “Tenure Denied: Union Busting and Anti-Intellectualism in the Corporate University,” in *Steal This University*, ed. Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson (Routledge, 2003), 123-137.

¹⁰ Bousquet, *How the University Works*, 30.

¹¹ Jenny Zhu, “Columbia Declines To Bargain With Graduate Student Union,” *Bwog*, January 30, 2018, <https://bwog.com/2018/01/columbia-declines-to-bargain-with-graduate-student-union/>.

action through which to produce new social relations premised on a more egalitarian, less exploitative university.

For these reasons, analyzing the role of rhetoric in the development of a worker identity among graduate student workers represents an important intervention in the fields of rhetorical studies, specifically, and labor studies, more generally. I define rhetoric as the study of how discourses gather intensity in the material world, relating to and embedding in it through affective encounters. This definition allows me to investigate more fully rhetoric's capacity to mobilize workers, bringing common experiences and exclusions into shared systems of meaning that offer an alternative path forward.¹² My own experience over five years as an organizer for the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), the labor union representing graduate student workers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, has familiarized me with the role of rhetoric in pursuing institutional change in higher education. Over those five years, I saw how state legislators, the UW System President and Board of Regents, and Wisconsin administrators,

¹² There is a loaded racial history to the term “workers.” David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* meticulously crafts a genealogy of organized labor that traces its development as a racist institution. Roediger argues that, from its origin, organized labor constructed the racial category of “white worker” as against the image of the enslaved Black worker, which allowed previously-exploited immigrant groups to claim whiteness in ways that undermined multiracial class solidarity. Though organized labor has often been and continues to be complicit in racist, sexist, and nationalist exclusions, successful examples of working-class organizing—for example, the Chicago Teachers’ Union—have relied on building explicitly multiracial, feminist, and international coalitions and lines of solidarity. In this dissertation, I engage with these critiques more fully in the Conclusion. This dissertation employs class as a central organizing category because I believe it has more explanatory power in demonstrating both the flows of power in the university and the connective potential (and necessity) of solidarity among workers across formative identity categories. The limitations of this project nonetheless open the door for further inquiry into the racialization of the working class, including but not limited to how graduate student labor organizing underattends to the racialized and gendered dimensions of the academic workplace.

David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso Books, 1991/2007).

including the Chancellor and the university's chief financial officer, adapted to consolidate decision-making power by both overt and covert means as they faced increased political and economic pressures to change key facets of the university's operations.¹³ I also saw firsthand how graduate student worker-organizers, both successfully and not, sought to inspire their labmates, classmates, co-instructors, and peers through rhetorical means to develop alternative sources of power that advanced their interests as graduate student workers in the university. What I came to understand is that the cause of graduate worker empowerment in institutional decision-making exists within an entanglement of discourses, power relations, and material structures.

This project contributes to conversations across the humanities focused on critical understandings of the modern American research university as a cultural, political, and economic institution that (re)produces hegemonic discourses and logics, and I expand on this effort in important ways.¹⁴ Learning from scholars in Rhetoric and Composition like Catherine Chaput, Marc Bousquet, Nancy Welch, and Tony Scott, I add to these humanistic understandings the notion of the university-as-workplace, constructed both materially and discursively through rhetorical activity that shapes the way interlocutors interact with and understand the labor that takes place on its campus and in its name. This dissertation offers what I understand to be only the second sustained examination of the rhetorical aspects of graduate workers; the first, Thomas Discenna's 2001 dissertation "Apprenticed or Exploited: Critical Rhetoric and the Yale Grade

¹³ The Board of Regents, which consists of 18 members, "establish[es] policies and rules for governing the System, plan[s] to meet future state needs for collegiate education...review[s] and approv[es] university budgets, and establish[es] the regulatory framework" of individual units. "Board of Regents," Board of Regents, December 8, 2016, <https://www.wisconsin.edu/regents/>.

¹⁴ See Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

Strike,” draws from theories of social movement and protest rhetorics, particularly McKerrow’s “critique of domination,” in considering the strike as a rhetorical event.¹⁵ Like Discenna, I am interested in the rhetoric of graduate labor in the modern American research university; my study differs, however, in that I draw from public sphere theory and Marxist rhetorical scholarship in order to highlight how (lack of) access to decision-making arenas conditions the rhetorical activity of graduate worker-organizers. I contend that analyzing the rhetorics surrounding graduate workers, graduate worker unions, and decisions affecting their working conditions offers scholars greater comprehension of the totality of the processes that sustain the university in the globalizing world and in the social imagination. Further, it offers to rhetorical studies a sustained analysis of the role of class consciousness in shaping rhetorical activity in the public sphere.

This dissertation analyzes how rhetorics of graduate labor clash with and condition rhetorical activity concerning workplace decision-making that circulates in deliberative arenas in and around the university. I examine the rhetorical tactics by which graduate worker-organizers promote an explicit worker identity that invests graduate workers with agency in decision-making over their working conditions; I also identify how administrators and state legislators circulate dominant conceptions of university decision-making that flatten power differentials and exclude graduate workers from decision-making *as workers*. This project interrogates how identification with one’s location in the class structure, overtly or otherwise, shapes the rhetorical activity of those with a stake in workplace decision-making: in this case, not only graduate workers and administrators, but also governing boards, faculty, undergraduate students, and state

¹⁵ Thomas Discenna, “Apprenticed or Exploited: Critical Rhetoric and the Yale Grad Strike,” PhD diss., (Wayne State University, 2001).

legislators. In so doing, I demonstrate that the ongoing rhetorical contest over how, exactly, to categorize graduate workers—as students or apprentices, professors-in-training or workers—is fundamentally a contest over the right of graduate workers to wield power through participation in workplace decision-making. It is, in short, a classed struggle over the democratic potential of the university system.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, this project asks the following questions: What do discourses of decision-making reveal about the rhetorical contestation over the definition of graduate labor in the university? What rhetorical strategies do union organizers use to contest exclusion from decision-making and translate workers' experiences into a collective demand for redress? How can attention to graduate workers' rhetorical activity expand the analytical lenses available to rhetorical scholars in understanding the 21st century university system? And finally, how does a class analysis deepen rhetoricians' understanding of how publics shape arguments advocating for access to decision-making power?

To address these questions, I consider how rhetorics of decision-making in the university—particularly rhetorical activity articulating graduate worker exploitation and exclusion from decision-making—contribute to the conditions of possibility for class consciousness-raising. The rhetorical processes of class consciousness-raising, rhetorician Dana Cloud writes, translate an inchoate mass of workers' lived experiences at work into collective identification and action as workers.¹⁶ In this dissertation, I explore how competing articulations of the graduate worker subject have both clarified and obstructed class consciousness-raising efforts by graduate worker unions to encourage graduate student identification with the label of

¹⁶ Dana Cloud, "Review of 'History and Class Consciousness / A Defense of the History of Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 286.

“worker.” As the history of the American labor movement has borne out, class consciousness-raising plays a significant role in the success or failure of workplace actions like strikes, sit-ins, work slowdowns, and sick-outs, in which workers collectively disrupt the operation of worksites to secure concessions when they are otherwise shut out of decision-making processes. When workers identify with and act on their collective capacity to withhold their labor so as to impede the smooth flow of capital accumulation, they come to understand that it is *their* labor that creates value for their employers, rather than the other way around; they thus threaten dominant capitalist rhetorics by opening up discursive space to advocate for alternative social arrangements, including but not limited to the redistribution of material resources. Put another way, it is in the class interest of employers to discourage employees’ identification as workers, marking the struggle for working-class identification as itself a rhetorical project.

Specifically, in this dissertation I argue that graduate worker rhetorics represent a key site of disruption to dominant rhetorics of decision-making that circulate in the university and the broader public. As both workers and students, graduate student workers occupy a liminal space that exceeds administrators’ most common discursive efforts to pin them down as primarily students or apprentices. Moreover, graduate student workers’ experiences—of labor exploitation, power asymmetries, workplace discrimination, low wages, exclusion from decision-making, and more—name dynamics that undermine efforts by legislators, administrators, and governing boards to legitimize their own authority to near-singularly determine the best interests of graduate workers specifically, and the university more broadly. In other words, the label of “graduate worker” presents discursive and material opportunities, otherwise unavailable to faculty or undergraduate student subjects, to expose and disrupt the administrative and managerial logics that set the rhetorical boundaries of the university—what can or cannot be

said, done, or enacted in the officially-sanctioned spaces of the university.¹⁷ This is among the reasons that the label of “worker” remains so hotly contested by administrators and governing boards resisting graduate employee unionization campaigns. It also justifies the university as a prime site in which to theorize the class content of and contradictions in discourses of decision-making, as the university system has long been a site of contestation to academic workers’ claims to rights *as workers*. As such, it is a venue where—unlike, say, factories or hospitals—rhetorics of worker-ness are particularly charged and power-laden.

Rhetorics of graduate labor and decision-making at the University of Wisconsin–Madison occur within the nexus of university, state, and public discourses regarding the role and responsibilities of public higher education in Wisconsin. Broadly, this network of discourses constitutes a public sphere, comprised of both dominant and marginal publics.¹⁸ As communications scholars like Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer contend, the public sphere is not singular but multiple, constituted by overlapping publics with differential access to and specific patterns of engagement across discursive arenas.¹⁹ Public discourse, Asen writes, “involves participants situated across various networks,” which necessitates that rhetorical analysis

¹⁷ Philosopher Alain Badiou, who I return to in the conclusion of this project, puts such rhetorics contesting the boundaries of authority thusly: they are what enable “the lines of force by virtue of which the State prescribes what is possible and what is impossible to be shifted for a time.” Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran, Paperback edition (London New York: Verso, 2015), 254.

¹⁸ Recent rhetorical scholarship has identified the limitations of the “sphere” metaphor to denote public discursive arenas (see Brouwer and Asen, 2010). While I am sympathetic to these arguments, I choose to employ the term “public sphere” to signal my participation in a particular strand of rhetorical scholarship.

¹⁹ Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen, eds., *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media, and the Shape of Public Life*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

recognizes diverse, competing interests as an irreducible feature of public discussion.²⁰ In my case studies, I analyze discourses from graduate workers and worker-organizers, university administrators, state legislators, journalists, and more; I strive to counter what I see as a dearth of class analysis in rhetorical scholarship on the public sphere by identifying how class shapes the particular configurations and understandings of graduate labor that participants reveal through public discourse.

The primary site of study of this dissertation, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is also a place where the idea of the “public” carries especially significant weight. The university is a public land-grant research university, a beneficiary of the bequeathment of federal lands under the Morrill Act of 1862.²¹ It is the flagship school of the University of Wisconsin system, the state of Wisconsin’s largest employer. Notably, one of the university’s deepest traditions is the “Wisconsin Idea,” which emphasizes the public-facing mission of knowledge production and dissemination at the University; former UW President Charles Van Hise declared in 1905 that “I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every home in the state.”²² The university has also been the site of significant student political activism, directed at

²⁰ Robert Asen, “Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (October 2, 2017), 329.

²¹ Importantly, white settlers forced the Ho-Chunk people to cede this land in 1832, followed by decades of ethnic cleansing and forced removal. As a land grant institution, UW-Madison also benefited from the federal redistribution of treaty land through the Morrill Act, resulting in approximately \$4.9 million in current US dollars from the 235,530 acres taken by treaty from the Menomoni in 1836 and 1848 and from the Chippewa (Ojibwe) in 1837 and 1842. The university’s understanding of the “public” has only recently come to include the state’s Indigenous peoples.

“UW-Madison Land Acknowledgement Statement,” German, Nordic, and Slavic+, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://gns.wisc.edu/uw-madison-land-acknowledgement-statement/>; Robert Lee et al., “University of Wisconsin,” High Country News, 2020, <https://www.landgrab.org/universities/university-of-wisconsin>.

²² “The Wisconsin Idea,” La Follette School of Public Affairs, 2022, <https://lafollette.wisc.edu/about/the-wisconsin-idea>.

both the University itself and broader American society. The University was the center of campus-based opposition to the Vietnam War and a major hub of the New Left; it was also the site of Black student organizing in the 1960s that led to the creation of the Afro-American Studies programs at the University in 1970. Germane to this dissertation, graduate student TAs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison were the first to unionize into an independent labor organization of TAs, bargain collectively, and obtain a contract.²³ The university’s status as a public institution, committed to the wellbeing of Wisconsin citizens and the recipient of federal funds, inevitably informed how activists crafted language around their demands; further, it continues to inform how administrators and legislators situate their own decision-making powers under the guise of public interests.

In making my arguments, I develop three case studies in which I analyze how discourses of graduate labor and workplace decision-making circulate and come into contestation in discursive arenas in and around the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Chapter Two focuses on the rhetorical construction of TAs’ investment in decision-making processes at UW–Madison in the year leading up to and during the UW-TAA contract negotiations of 1969-1970. With this case, I show how worker-organizers within the TAA used the issue of curricular decision-making to shift TA consciousness toward a new articulation of the graduate worker subject as a classed, agential worker within the university system. The next chapters look at a campaign fifty years later in which the union struggled to connect the experiences of graduate workers to larger political interests and pressures in ways that would inform their self-perception as workers and prepare them and their allies to confront administrators directly over decision-making powers.

²³ Mark D. Van Ells, “More than a Union: The Teaching Assistants Association and Its 1970 Strike against the University of Wisconsin,” *The Michigan Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (1999), 103.

Chapter Three examines how TAA organizers structured the participation of graduate workers in protest against student fees, a revenue stream critical to the interpellation of students into neoliberal political rationality. This case suggests that, by failing to connect the personal implications of student fees to larger political trends, the TAA struggled to explain administrative reluctance and other stalling tactics to graduate workers in ways that would have prepared them to take disruptive, collective labor action. The final case study looks at how worker-organizers in the TAA attempted to write themselves into decision-making powers over student fees through participation in a Faculty Senate meeting, in the process misidentifying it as a discursive arena wherein workers could meaningfully challenge administrative decision-making even as amendments to state law had severely weakened faculty and student power over shared governance. It represented a moment, to quote Cloud, in which “rhetorical savvy could not produce movement success and in which the deployment of other, materially coercive (though not necessarily violent) action might have been more effective.”²⁴

While my case studies are confined to the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, their exigence does not stop at its borders. Since the early 1970s, American organized labor has ceded ground to conservative political forces whose anti-unionism and political influence has overwhelmingly shaped the ideological and material terrain on which labor now finds itself. While a recent essay in *New York Magazine* declared that “Democracy Dies When Labor Unions Do,” union density has declined dramatically, from a 20.1% union membership rate among wage and salary workers in the public- and private-sectors in 1983 to a 10.5% union

²⁴ Dana L. Cloud, “Fighting Words: Labor and the Limits of Communication at Staley, 1993 to 1996,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (May 2005), 512.

membership rate in 2018.²⁵ This decrease in union membership has also corresponded with a decrease in what we might call “labor consciousness” and awareness of labor history and class consciousness as an organizing tool, not limited to but certainly true in American universities and disciplines like Rhetoric and Composition.²⁶ This decrease in labor consciousness has provided vital rhetorical space for alternative forms of organizing along lines of shared identities like race, gender, or sexual orientation. At the same time, the dearth of coalition-building between these groups and strong working-class organizations has marginalized working-class politics from non-workplace struggles and has made it easier for dominant institutions to undercut class consciousness-raising efforts. As scholar-activists Jesse Hagopian and John T. Green contend, mobilizing unions in defense of broad-based social justice issues that extend beyond their immediate workplace interests can draw attention to the intersections of struggles between workers and other groups fighting for justice.²⁷ Absent strong working-class organizations in solidarity and partnership with organizations mobilized around broader social justice issues, the protracted and subterranean consolidation of decision-making powers among a small, connected group of decision-makers in both public and private institutions will intensify.

²⁵ Eric Levitz, “Democracy Dies When Labor Unions Do,” *New York Magazine*, September 18, 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/09/democracy-dies-when-labor-unions-do.html>; Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Economics Daily*, “Union membership rate 10.5 percent in 2018, down from 20.1 percent in 1983,” January 25, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/union-membership-rate-10-point-5-percent-in-2018-down-from-20-point-1-percent-in-1983.htm>

²⁶ See Nancy Welch, “‘We’re Here, and We’re Not Going Anywhere’: Why Working-Class Rhetorical Traditions ‘Still’ Matter,” *College English* 73, no. 3 (2011); James Arnt Aune, “Cultures of Discourse: Marxism and Rhetorical Theory,” in *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent*, ed. Michael David Hazen and David Williams (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

²⁷ Jesse Hagopian and John T. Green, “Teachers’ Unions and Social Justice,” in *Education and Capitalism: Struggles for Learning and Liberation*, ed. Jeff Bale and Sarah Knopp (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2012).

While deliberative rhetoric alone cannot stop this backslide, the activity of workers in motion—strikes, sit-ins, rallies, walk-outs—invites an expansive inquiry into the constitutive relationship between social change and working-class organizing.

In short, with this dissertation, I argue that graduate worker rhetorics present opportunities to expose the limits to dominant discourses of university decision-making and reconstruct the rhetorical boundaries of the university in the social imagination. Alternatively, worker discourses that fail to integrate systemic understandings of workplace relations struggle to displace widely-circulating institutional discourses that obstruct the development of labor consciousness. To situate this argument, the following section engages with public sphere and counterpublics scholarship to identify how exclusion from decision-making arenas shapes the rhetorical output of excluded groups, like graduate workers, as well as to reappraise the role of class location in relation to a collective's recognition of exclusion. My purpose in what follows is to extend theories of counterpublicity and the political economic conditions of capitalist class relations to account for how working-class rhetorical activity mediates class consciousness among workers under asymmetrical institutional power relations.

Counterpublicity and the Working Class

“The University Works Because We Do” expands the scope of counterpublic theory by attending to the classed valences of workers' rhetorical activity. Counterpublic scholarship arose as a response to conceptual omissions in Jurgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. There, Habermas explores the development, transformation, and dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere, a discursive arena in between civil society and the state that arose with the advent of a global market-based economy; the bourgeois public sphere represented a space

for private people to come together into a public to debate and discuss issues of common concern. As has been compellingly argued, however, Habermas' model presumed a singular deliberative public sphere predicated on the constitutive exclusion of subjugated groups—women, workers, the landless, people of color, among others. Habermas' inattention to these groups, Nancy Fraser argues, contributes to his failure to examine “other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” that existed alongside the bourgeois public sphere; in turn, he elevates the bourgeois public sphere as representative of *the* public.²⁸ In forwarding a notion of “subaltern counterpublics” that existed constitutively with the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser (and Rita Felski before her) seeded the theoretical framework for counterpublic studies, which accounts for the rhetorical activity of multiple, alternative publics largely excluded from public debate over issues affecting them.

Specifically, this project understands class-conscious graduate workers as a particular type of counterpublic in public discourses, what I term in Chapter Two a *working-class counterpublic*. As Asen and Brouwer note, the “counter-” in “counterpublic” stems from publics' exclusion from participation in political discourse and an absence of political power.²⁹ Working-class counterpublicity denotes a rhetorical mode wherein interlocutors challenge exclusion from workplace decision-making from a working-class standpoint, a concept that emerged from the thinking of Georg Lukács; Dana Cloud and Kathleen Feyh argue it is from this standpoint that the interests central to workers' self-activity gains communicative and material unity, thus enabling working-class rhetors to recognize and communicate their agency as a class and

²⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), 60-61.

²⁹ Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, eds., *Counterpublics and the State*, SUNY Series in Communication Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 2-3.

struggle ideologically for a greater labor consciousness. Counterpublic scholarship concerning organized labor is limited, with notable examples being the work of Gerard Hauser, Brian Dolber, and Ewa Alicja Majewska.³⁰ Welch traces this paucity of scholarship to the (erroneous) belief amongst scholars that we now live in a post-industrial, post-Fordist society where working-class power is no longer a salient lens through which to situate our analyses. Aune, too, notes how studies of the working class were considered passé in the late 20th century.³¹ This dissertation joins Welch, Aune, and others by productively bringing the work of rhetorical scholars into contact with the counterpublic tactics of graduate student worker-organizers so as to demonstrate how a working-class analysis can advance rhetorical theories of counterpublicity and deliberative rhetorics. Moreover, studying this site can contribute to further theorizations of working-class rhetorics as constitutive of and located within feminist, antiracist, pro-immigrant, and queer social movement rhetorics, to name a few.

Key to my study of the TAA is its tempestuous relationship with the state, represented both by the UW administration and by the legislature of the state of Wisconsin. By this, I refer not simply to the fact that Wisconsin graduate assistants are employed by the state of Wisconsin; rather I understand them as particular subjects entangled within power relations that aim to produce order amongst the body politic through coercive and, more commonly, non-coercive means. One of the contradictions of contemporary organized labor is that unions simultaneously rely on the state for legal recognition under its labor laws and, in the case of public-sector

³⁰ Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Brian Dolber, "From Socialism to 'Sentiment': Toward a Political Economy of Communities, Counterpublics, and Their Media Through Jewish Working Class History," *Communication Theory* 21, no. 1 (February 2011); Ewa Alicja Majewska, "The Utopia of 'Solidarity' Between Public Sphere and Counterpublics: Institutions of the Common Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 29, no. 2 (2018).

³¹ Aune, "Cultures of Discourse," 158.

workers, act against it when on strike. Documenting how political economic conditions have informed this relationship puts me in conversation with counterpublic scholars who note how actors working on behalf of the state can utilize its significant ideological apparatus to coopt or in other ways disarm counterpublics' imagining of alternatives. Asen, for one, notes how the state intervenes in counterpublic spheres as a "powerful participant" whose gravitational pull changes and shapes counterpublic rhetorical activity; the state, he writes, "may impose institutional rules on counterpublic spheres or co-opt counterpublic discourse to further the interests of more powerful participants in wider public spheres."³² For another, Brian Dolber argues in his study of the emergence and decline of a Jewish working-class community in New York that seeking agency through the state led to the "unmaking" of the community's counterpublic orientation.³³ This possibility for cooptation and compromise exists just below the surface of my case studies on the present-day TAA, in which changes in the political economic terrain of American society and the American university system have transformed the rhetorical tactics and efficacy of the claims of working-class counterpublics to decision-making power-sharing in the workplace. Grappling with the tensions inherent in the TAA's pursuit of access to state-sanctioned deliberative arenas allows me to tease apart how the pursuit of agency and representation through the state activates rhetorical limitations that serve to obstruct workers' voices in advocating for their own interests.

Though I study the graduate worker union at UW–Madison in this dissertation, I maintain in this project that working-class counterpublicity is not necessarily tied to the rhetorical activity

³² Robert Asen, "Representing the State in South Central Los Angeles," In *Counterpublics and the State*, edited by Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 154.

³³ Dolber, "From Socialism to 'Sentiment,'" 105.

of labor unions or specific to UW–Madison, but is rather rooted in discourses that employ a working-class standpoint, deployed emergently and strategically from particular locations by particular bodies at particular moments for particular effects. Robert Asen asserts that it is through a recognition and articulation of exclusion from dominant publics—rather than through a particular person, place, or topic—that counterpublics maintain their “counter” status.

Counterpublics, writes Asen, emerge as “explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants.”³⁴ Asen’s emphasis on the discursive features of counterpublics allows for a theory of working-class counterpublicity to be applied beyond narrow contemporary understandings of class power rooted exclusively in organized labor unions.³⁵ Indeed, it is in articulating how the class structure of capitalist society imbricates and inflects wide-ranging social issues—sometimes articulated by a labor union, sometimes through other avenues—that working-class counterpublicity can be activated and deployed strategically. This distinction will be made most clear in Chapters Three and Four, in which I argue that the

³⁴ Robert Asen, “Seeking the ‘Counter,’ in Counterpublics,” *Communication Theory* 10, no. 4 (November 2000), 425.

³⁵ An important note here is that organized labor is a phenomenon distinct from the sort of working-class political tradition that I draw from in this dissertation, although the two do overlap. The working-class political tradition is a body of knowledge, a tradition of political thought—descended from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxembour, Angela Davis, CLR James, and too many more—that names class contestation as the engine of history and that invests agentive power in the world’s working class to overthrow capitalism and bring about a socialist or communist future. In its history, this knowledge has taken multiple, diverse forms, including: the Paris Commune, the Communist Internationales, Russian soviets (workers’ councils), and American workers’ organizations like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, etc. Organized labor in its modern-day connotation represents a specific manifestation of working-class organization that has diverse and contradictory relationships to the working-class political tradition; in many ways, the current configuration of organized labor represents a distortion of the working-class political tradition. For more on how present-day organized labor has compromised its role as a voice for working-class politics, see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Worker’s Movement* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2015).

tradition of working-class counterpublicity under which the TAA first formed in the late 1960s has been obscured in the 21st century as a result of the political economic conditions of the neoliberal university.

Working-class counterpublicity allows me to problematize reductive connections between one's class location and counterpublic status. In identifying discursive recognition of exclusion as a key piece by which counterpublics are cohered, I model my theorizing of working-class counterpublics particularly on the insights of Catherine Squires. Squires' work on the multiple and heterogeneous Black publics rejects a singular, monolithic, and homogeneous Black public sphere, emphasizing that "not all people who are classified as Black will participate in all or any Black publics." Instead, she writes that engagement in a Black public rests on the extent to which members "engage in common discourses and negotiations" about Blackness and pursue "particularly defined Black interests."³⁶ This definitional work allows Squires to articulate Black publics that are not tied to essentialist notions of static identity categories. In a similar way, I understand working-class counterpublicity to be engaged by those who debate and discuss issues salient to the working class writ large and the broader class structure of workplaces and society, including but not limited to exploitation, discrimination, domination, and building workers' power. Engaging Squires with this helps me name how one's status as a worker, or even as a union officer or leader, does not immediately grant them working-class counterpublic status; rather, it is through distinct rhetorical activity from a working-class standpoint that names them as such.

³⁶ Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 2002), 454.

In the next section, I trace rhetorical scholars' engagement with Marxist theory, drawing from contemporary rhetorical scholars as well as cultural theorists working in the Marxist tradition. Doing so situates this project within a Marxist rhetorical framework that informs the perspective I bring to my analysis of graduate labor.

Marxism and Rhetoric

By examining discourses surrounding decision-making arrangements and institutional power-sharing through a rhetorical lens, this project extends Marxist rhetorical theory developed by James Arnt Aune and Dana Cloud, who have long argued that class relations are fundamentally rhetorical, constituted as much by discursive and affective relations existing between and among workers and their employers as by structural relations. Aune, Cloud, and other Marxist rhetoricians have understood class relations to be enacted and mediated discursively and affectively in the process of consciousness-raising that aims to undermine the prevailing class structure.³⁷ Though not all rhetorical activity can be understood in class terms, rhetorics of decision-making expose the contradictions between workers' experience and institutional discourses and leave residual traces of class relations that a fine-grained rhetorical analysis can bring to light.³⁸ In understanding class relations as enacted rhetorically, this project

³⁷ Though a historian by trade, E.P. Thompson offers a decidedly rhetorical understanding of class in his 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class*: "I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships...The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context."

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 9.

³⁸ To take one example: the TAA's slogan and the inspiration for this dissertation's title, "The University Works Because We Do," does rhetorical work by naming the structural relationship that graduate workers have to their workplace—a causal relationship by which their labor makes possible the unimpeded continuation of the university's research and teaching missions—at the same time that it defines a collective "we" constituting graduate student workers and tacitly challenges the way decision-making powers are distributed in such a way that places these powers outside of graduate workers' control.

leans particularly on the work of Cloud, whose compelling readings of cultural texts name rhetoric's capacity to mediate workers' awareness of their class location, to bring shared experiences into broader systems of meaning, as the "site of the struggle for consciousness, during which the experience of immediacy...is articulated in terms of the whole, or totality, of the system."³⁹ Further, Cloud contends that the conception of discrete class interests create grounds for identification across identity differences and avoid anti-solidaristic notions of identity politics or individual grievance.⁴⁰ To be clear, I am not (nor is Cloud) suggesting that working-class projects ignore identity-based oppressions; identity-based oppressions compound class-based domination to further exploit politically- and socially-marginalized communities and must be explicitly confronted. Rather, identifying shared class interests precipitates class solidarity, a requirement for challenging oppression and exploitation today.

Both Aune and Cloud have sought to recover prominent Marxist and Left intellectuals and connect them to present-day rhetorical scholarship, including Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, in an effort to reappraise the study of dialectical materialism with a rhetorical sensibility. As Cloud writes, "Contrary to established thinking in our field, many Marxists, Lukács among them, were neither idealists nor determinists, but dialecticians with eminently rhetorical observations about the discursively mediated relationships between the subjects and objects—and subject-objects—of history."⁴¹ This project follows Cloud's genealogy by drawing from an earlier Marxist critique of the Habermasian public sphere by German media theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, who have received little mention outside of the work

³⁹ Cloud, "Review," 286.

⁴⁰ Dana L. Cloud, "The Matrix and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 4 (December 2006): 331.

⁴¹ Cloud, "Review," 289.

of Cloud and Gerard Hauser.⁴² Negt and Kluge, German contemporaries of Habermas, composed their 1972 work *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* in response to the 1962 publication of Habermas' *Structural Transformation*. Negt and Kluge evaluate the mechanisms by which working-class experience (*Erfahrung* in German) is mediated and expressed rhetorically in the public sphere, finding that it is systematically excluded and made illegible in the mass media and consumer culture of the bourgeois public sphere. More than this, however, and anticipating Fraser's argument, they deconstruct the public sphere's claims to be representative of the public, insisting that it fluctuates "between denoting a facade of legitimation that is capable of being deployed in diverse ways and denoting a mechanism for controlling the perception of what is relevant for society."⁴³ Even as some critics have found Negt and Kluge to be overly deterministic, their claims that the public sphere is foundationally incapable of expressing workers' experiences in the process of production provides a foundation upon which I articulate the balance of class power as a salient feature of rhetorical activity in the public sphere.

Negt and Kluge's critique of the bourgeois public sphere and their examination of the mediation of working-class experience brings Marxist rhetorics into contact with scholars of standpoint theory, affect, and collective rhetoric. Cloud and Kathleen Feyh tease out the concept

⁴² Brouwer and Paulesc attribute this oversight to the fact that Negt and Kluge's conceptual model "most aggressively accuses the public sphere of being a delusion, and its version of counterpublicity unwaveringly centers the proletariat as its standpoint. [Alternative] ideological and critical/cultural modes have a larger circulation perhaps because neither requires the overthrow of liberal democracy or the promises of liberal-democratic aspirations." Daniel C. Brouwer and Marie-Louise Paulesc, "Counterpublic Theory Goes Global: A Chronicle of a Concept's Emergences and Mobilities," In *What Democracy Looks Like*, edited by Christina Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness, (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama Press, 2017), 82.

⁴³ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 1972/1993/2016), 2.

of working-class standpoint by identifying the rhetorical dimensions of class-conscious discourses that mediate the development of workers' "collective self-consciousness of [their] class position."⁴⁴ Drawing from Marxist scholars like Georg Lukács and feminist standpoint scholars like Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, and Susan Hekman, Cloud and Feyh argue that a working-class standpoint provides one necessary potentiality of organizing workers' shared experience into persuasive constitutive rhetorics. For Cloud and Feyh, a working-class standpoint is the view from which the social relations under capitalism become manifest for workers, and the view from which the class interests central to working-class uprisings can gain communicative and material unity. Whereas Cloud and Feyh develop their theory of working-class standpoint through the study of the socialist anthem the "Internationale" across various historical moments and versions, I develop novel insights in Chapter Two regarding the development of a working-class standpoint that emerges contingently in response to specific workplace conditions. This key difference deepens our understanding of working-class standpoint theory by attending to the workplace as a site of discrete and emergent counterpublic rhetorical activity.

In considering working-class standpoint as a mobilizing tactic meant to engage workers who share a common class location across a given worksite, I theorize working-class counterpublicity as a particular type of collective rhetoric. I learn from Tasha Dubriwny's work on the rhetorical activity of second-wave feminists, which notes how collective rhetoric offers a collaborative heuristic to rhetorical activity through a "collective articulation of multiple,

⁴⁴ Dana L. Cloud and Kathleen Eaton Feyh, "Reason in Revolt: Emotional Fidelity and Working Class Standpoint in the 'Internationale,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (August 8, 2015), 312.

overlapping, individual experiences.”⁴⁵ She identifies how collective rhetoric is founded on an experiential epistemology—a rhetoric with “lived experience at its epistemic core.”⁴⁶ This aligns with Cloud and Feyh’s contention that a working-class standpoint affords worker-organizers an epistemological foundation for aligning those who share a common class location with working-class ideas. Discourses that aim to marshal workers toward collective labor action are rooted in shared interests and experiences; these rhetorics circulate in deliberative arenas and contend for legitimacy with dominant rhetorics that seek to obfuscate or undermine shared working-class interests.⁴⁷ As I demonstrate in the next chapter, this rhetoric has the potential to produce new and alternative vocabularies to those circulating in dominant discourses that afford greater faithfulness to workers’ lived experience, and thus, a greater opportunity to cohere otherwise unorganized workers.

To put it bluntly, invoking Marxist thought in academic work invites criticism, warranted and not. As I see it, Marxist thought provides a frame through which to analyze the social

⁴⁵ Tasha N. Dubriwny, “Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings’ Abortion Speak-Out of 1969,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 4 (November 2005), 396.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ One example of this comes from the state of West Virginia, which Donald Trump won in the 2016 presidential election by 68.5%, his largest share of the vote in any state, by deploying language that resonated with rural working-class voters. One year later, West Virginia public school teachers, some of whom voted for Trump in 2016, took part in a statewide strike against the state legislature. They were persuaded to join the picket lines not just by rising insurance costs and invasive workplace measures (material interests), but also by rhetorically persuasive co-workers in private Facebook groups and by derogatory remarks made by their elected officials (discursive acts). These were teachers who in one moment saw their class interests being represented by a narcissistic billionaire, and who in another moment responded to material changes to political economic conditions and discursive activity from worker-organizers on social media by going on strike. Eileen J. Leamon and Jason Bucelato, “Federal Elections 2016” (Washington, DC: Federal Election Commission, December 2017), <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/federalelections2016.pdf>; Eric Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*, (New York: Verso Books, 2019).

relations brought into being by the productive process of a given political economic order. In other words, it allows us to analyze how the class structure under capitalism connects people to one another and conditions their rhetorical—discursive and material—activity. While not the only approach to explore class-based rhetorical activity, a Marxist framework is especially appropriate to my research questions, which strive to better understand how the rhetorical activity of workers is conditioned by their understanding of class power and by the distribution of workplace decision-making controls. In pursuing this line of analysis, I respond to calls by Aune, Cloud, Welch and others to better integrate Marxist political thought into rhetorical theories of human agency and historical change.

Taken as a whole, “The University Works Because We Do” contributes to Marxist rhetorical scholarship by attending to how capitalist class relations inform salient issues of (exclusion from) decision-making and deliberative arenas, the overdetermining role of the state, and collective identification and mobilization. By situating my work in this scholarly thread, I aim to illuminate how the rhetorical opportunities of workers interact with and are conditioned by dominant logics and discursive arenas that have the potential to overwhelm workers’ recognition of and advocacy for their shared interests. In the process, I ground my analysis of graduate workers in the modern American research university to tease out the ways in which, as a cultural formation, it mirrors and distorts the class dynamics of broader American society, which I describe in what follows.

Oppositional Rhetorics in the Modern American Research University

In addition to its engagement with Marxist discussions in rhetorical scholarship, this dissertation intervenes in recent rhetorical scholarship concerning the higher education system by examining the rhetorical activity of graduate student workers advocating for their rights as

workers within the political economy of the modern American research university. The university is a site that, as I noted in the opening paragraphs, is rife with asymmetrical class power.⁴⁸ Rhetorical scholars have deftly explored how campus-based activism and organizing has responded to the changing material conditions of the last fifty years in U.S. higher education and American society more generally. In his own study of the University of Wisconsin–Madison in the “Long Sixties,” David Fleming notes how curricular changes to the freshman composition program were influenced most directly not by developments in disciplinary knowledge, but by “the massive cultural, demographic, political, economic and institutional changes that were taking place in the country at large, changes felt especially acutely on college and university campuses.”⁴⁹ Since then, the political economic conditions of the modern American university have transformed dramatically, as the stark differences between the rhetorical tactics of the 1969-1970 TAA and the 2017-2019 TAA will demonstrate in the chapters that follow. Whereas federal funding of higher education was ascendant between the end of World War II and the 1960s, allowing universities to educate representatives of what Wendy Brown deems “the widest class basis in human history” in the liberal arts and sciences, the institutionalization of neoliberal logics and fealty to the global marketplace, as well as the omnipresent crises wrought by declining state and federal funding, have shifted the funding model of higher education toward austerity budgets and training students for job market potential.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Asymmetrical class power also extends to university staff, who arguably have less access to decision-making than administrators, faculty, or students, even though university staff make possible a significant amount of the labor of operating the university.

⁴⁹ David Fleming, *From Form to Meaning*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 24.

⁵⁰ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 180.

Scholars from cultural studies and critical university studies have interrogated the role of the university in sustaining hegemony and entrenching power relations through its role in mobilizing and legitimizing knowledge formations. I rely on these scholars in this dissertation to situate the university system as both material and rhetorical, as existing both as a physical set of spaces and as an ideological entity whose gravitational pull exerts strong pressures on out-groups, regularly producing conformity or co-optation even under the guise of progress. Roderick Ferguson's work illuminates the ways in which the university has functioned alongside the state and capital as a mechanism of power to assimilate minority difference and culture into its hegemonic order.⁵¹ Thus, even as disciplinary formations position their focus on minority cultures as "resistance" to hegemony, Ferguson argues, by way of Foucault, that the concessions by universities to student protestors in the Civil Rights era actually allowed the university to assimilate minority difference into its order and reaffirm institutional power. In much the same way, this project asks: how has the gravitational pull of the state and university as "partners" in decision-making warped the ways that graduate student workers and worker-organizers understand their union's relationship to hegemony and institutional power? Chapters Three and Four suggest that the failure to identify and challenge the academy's truth-regime and its asymmetrical decision-making powers constrains the rhetorical activity of workers and worker-organizers and their ability to promote solidarity across the worksite.

This project uses rhetorical analysis to better understand the university as a powerful mediating institution in the inclusion and exclusion of certain voices in discourses of decision-making. I learn from Ferguson and other scholars of critical university studies scholars who have

⁵¹ Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

interrogated the university's unique role in shaping public discursive practices. In so doing, I bring critical university studies into the study of campus-based counterpublics in order to explicate the relationship between class ideologies in the university and the political economic features of American society that condition university's responses to counterpublic contestation. In this, I draw from scholars like Nancy Welch, who recovers Marxist linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle's notion of *la langue de coton*—woolen language—to describe how university administrators deploy an “anti-performative” rhetoric that says much but does little.⁵² This language serves to disguise the levers of power and decision-making and disengage students and instructors who may otherwise be invested in the operations of the university; it rhetorically mediates the processes by which, as Wendy Brown writes, “Inclusion and participation as indices of democracy have been separated off from the powers and the unbounded field of deliberation that would make them meaningful as terms of shared rule.”⁵³ As such, the contemporary university as a site of tension between democracy and hierarchy, between labor and management, becomes a consequential place to analyze the role of the TAA in advancing arguments for participatory parity in governance structures. The project of articulating working-class counterpublicity through the neoliberal university allows me to analyze the intrusions of neoliberal rationality into institutional factors that condition workers' and worker-organizers' understandings of themselves.

In understanding class-conscious graduate workers as constituting a working-class counterpublic, I learn from scholars of higher education and public intellectuals both in and

⁵² Nancy Welch, “La Langue de Coton: How Neoliberal Language Pulls the Wool over Faculty Governance,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 11, no. 3 (October 1, 2011), 548.

⁵³ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 128.

beyond rhetorical studies, specifically thinkers attentive to the relationship between political economy, class composition and dynamics, and graduate labor conditions. In particular, scholars such as Marc Bousquet, Nancy Welch, Erik Olin Wright, and Barbara and John Ehrenreich analyze both the material conditions undergirding academic labor and the ideological contours of intellectual work—the sort of work in which graduate students may someday find themselves—in relation to the class structure of broader society. Bousquet, for one, calls graduate degree holders “the ‘waste product’ of a labor system that primarily makes use of graduate schools to maintain a pool of cheap workers.”⁵⁴ Importantly, Bousquet is careful to separate the concrete labor that graduate student workers perform from their identification with tenured professors and intellectuals who have relative job security; they are two different class locations, even if one aspires to the other. At the same time, it remains true that, to quote Wayne Au, “schools do more than reproduce capitalist inequalities; they also do ideological work to justify the existence of those same inequalities.”⁵⁵ This project stays with the tensions inherent in the (re)production of capitalist logics in the university and the opportunities for rupturing such logics that exist when academic workers speak from a standpoint informed by their class location. To that end, I turn to an extended passage from Nancy Welch, who cogently articulates the contours of this dilemma:

[There] is a struggle with the question of whether academics can teach and act from such radical roots or are bound, by the function of education, to capitalist ideology. When Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich took up this question directly in the 1979 volume *Between Labor and Capital*, they argued that the twentieth century brought the consolidation of a distinct ‘professional-managerial class’ that doesn’t waffle between working- and ruling-class identification, but instead binds together teachers, social workers, college professors, technicians, engineers, nurses, doctors—all ‘salaried mental workers’ whose shared function is the ‘reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist

⁵⁴ Marc Bousquet, “Introduction: Does a ‘Good Job Market in Composition’ Help Composition Labor?” In *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, edited by Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁵ Wayne Au, *A Marxist Education*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 85.

class relations' (45). But while the Ehrenreichs's argument has had compelling explanatory power and wide influence, we also find in *Between Labor and Capital* Erik Olin Wright's *caution against conflating ideological function with structural position. Yes, a prime function of education within capitalism is to reproduce class relations, but at the same time the structural positions and daily experiences of teachers (and students) can be decidedly contradictory.* This 'disarticulation' between ideological function and structural roles and experiences, Wright argues, creates the conditions of fluctuation in the middle strata, with teachers, social workers, and other lower-rung professionals shaped not only by their continuing "critical locations for the dissemination and elaboration of bourgeois ideology" but also by the "partial proletarianization" of their professions that was already apparent by the end of the 1970s (emphasis added).⁵⁶

What Welch's synthesis points to is the ongoing debate about the role of academic workers and intellectuals in broader social change: does their structural location in the university system enable identification with worker-ness? The answer, clearly, is: it vacillates. However, it should be noted that neither the Ehrenreichs nor Wright are concerned specifically with graduate student workers, whose material conditions are, as Bousquet writes, more explicitly tied to the political economy of the university. As I demonstrate in Chapter Two, the ability of worker-organizers in the TAA to deploy clear class-conscious rhetorics that articulated their structural location in the university system put them in a position to refute the formative ideological narratives of graduate work that otherwise would have immobilized their unionization campaign.

Materials and Chapter Overview

This dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations in rhetorical theory about the role of counterpublics in advancing social change through the particular standpoint of rank-and-file workers and worker-organizers. It analyzes how arguments are made about institutional decision-making arrangements and how political economic and institutional factors condition such

⁵⁶ Nancy Welch, "'We're Here, and We're Not Going Anywhere,'" 227. For more on this debate, see Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America* 11 no. 2 (March-April 1977), 7-32; Erik Olin Wright, "Intellectuals and the Class Structure of Capitalist Society" in *Between Labor and Capital*, edited by Pat Walker (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1979), 191-212.

arguments. I build an archive consisting of a variety of ephemera—TAA publications and propaganda, administrative memos and letters to faculty and the broader community; local and national media coverage in *The Daily Cardinal*, *The Wisconsin State Journal*, and beyond; photos and videos; TAA Executive Board meeting minutes. Many of the archival documents are from the Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Wisconsin Archives; others are from the TAA's own (informal) archive, located in the TAA's main office in Madison. My rhetorical analysis is attuned to the historical, cultural, and political valences of these documents, and I pay close attention to the extent to which there is a discernible discursive presence of class-conscious rhetorics.

In this regard, this dissertation takes theoretical cues from rhetorical scholars in the Marxist tradition such as Dana Cloud, Nancy Welch, Tony Scott, and Catherine Chaput, who analyze the interplay between class relations and the affective force of the ebb and flow of class strength as conditioning factors of rhetorical activity. This approach is best characterized by tracing how certain discourses and material interventions in liberal institutions are bolstered and made (im)possible by surging or receding working-class social activity, such as Welch's connection between Progressive-era mass movements committed to public rights and goods and the push for the foundation of the American Association of University Professors.⁵⁷ Analyzing my materials utilizing this framework allows me to identify how the rhetorical activity of working-class actors functions in relation to broader political economic conditions that they are at once helplessly constrained by and that they themselves produce (to paraphrase the famous Marx quote that "Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly

⁵⁷ Welch, "La Langue de Coton," 552.

found, given and transmitted from the past”).⁵⁸ In so doing, I seek to incorporate into our field the material and ideological constraints imposed on rhetorical activity by the tensions and contradictions of the class structure of society.

Disciplinarily, this dissertation follows David Zarefsky’s fourth sense of rhetorical history: a rhetorical study of historical events, which “begins with the assumption that the rhetorical historian has the same subject matter as any other historian: ‘human life in all its totality and multiplicity.’”⁵⁹ Within my work, I offer a rhetorical gloss to the last fifty years of relations between the TAA and the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with particular attention paid to its founding years and to the last decade of its advocacy. Understanding the project through this lens situates the project disciplinarily—it is both rhetorical and historical.

This dissertation uses a standard case study methodology to, as David Fleming writes, “tell a general story by focusing on a particular one.”⁶⁰ Put another way, I demonstrate how working-class counterpublicity is not particular to the TAA, nor to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, but is rather a set of rhetorical tactics, sometimes articulated and sometimes co-opted, that find discursive expression through workers’ capacity to name alternative social relations to bourgeois norms. While there are limitations to using a predominantly white graduate labor union whose members may move on to more lucrative careers as representative of a working-class standpoint, the structural location of graduate workers in the university labor system, and their relationship to power within their institutions, maps onto broader conversations regarding

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert Tucker, (New York, Norton, 1978): 595.

⁵⁹ David Zarefsky, “Four Senses of Rhetorical History,” in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, edited by Kathleen J. Turner, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 30.

⁶⁰ Fleming, *From Form to Meaning*, 21.

socioeconomic inequality in the class structure. As such, without overstating the precarity of graduate student workers, this dissertation nonetheless theorizes a counterpublicity rooted in class-based discursive and material articulations of graduate workers themselves.

Chapter Two, “Defining Graduate Workers as Decision-Makers in the TAA’s 1970 Unionization Campaign,” draws from TAA newsletters and other communications during the union’s formation and certification campaign of 1969 and 1970 to investigate the formation of a counterpublic explicitly attentive to the class dynamics of the university system writ large and the role of the graduate student worker within it. Through the lens of Dana Cloud’s theory of working-class standpoint, this chapter examines how the TAA rhetorically constructed its investment in and advocacy for more dispersed decision-making processes at UW–Madison. It shows how the TAA formed around explicit invocations of class dynamics and sought to heighten TA consciousness of both their structural exclusion from decision-making and their opportunities for resistance to administrative compliance with broader hegemonic ideologies. This case study demonstrates how the TAA—the first group of graduate student workers to unionize into an independent labor organization of TAs, bargain collectively, and obtain a contract—utilized class-conscious rhetoric that allowed them to articulate a new definition of graduate student labor, revealing the latent normative commitments that graduate student workers and academic workers must consciously and deliberately problematize.

Chapter Three, “Constructing the Graduate Worker in the Neoliberal University,” considers how the TAA structured graduate student participation in its campaign around student fees in light of neoliberal changes to the modern American research university. Looking at the campaign from 2017 to 2019—including publicity, public actions, and communications with and from administrators—I argue that the union’s failure to engage in anti-neoliberal consciousness-

raising constrained its ability to prepare graduate workers to take more disruptive collective labor action. In the absence of discourses connecting personal feelings of injustice to larger political interests and trends in the university, the union struggled to cohere a working-class counterpublic that could withstand misinformation, rhetorical obfuscation, stalling tactics, and anti-labor action that university administrators have demonstrated willingness to take.

Chapter Four, “Shared Governance as Rhetorical *Topos* and Asymmetries of Meaning in Deliberative Arenas,” considers how neoliberal logics have warped claims in favor of the redistribution of decision-making powers in the contemporary university. The chapter draws from Christopher Duerringer’s conception of rhetorical arbitrage, alongside Marxist philosophies of language, to account for how asymmetrical class power makes possible a sort of administrative double-speak that simultaneously champions shared governance practices and consolidates decision-making power among unaccountable administrators and state actors. I contend that shared governance as *topos* provides enduring rhetorical utility to administrators and other high-level decision-makers as a rhetorical strategy for exercising power and aligning shared governance participants with administrative decision-making priorities.

Taken together, this project examines the rhetorical contestation over the definition of graduate labor as it relates to workplace decision-making. I explore the rhetorical strategies of graduate worker-organizers in building toward collective workplace action. The three case studies highlight how the rhetorics of graduate labor shape and are shaped by the interplay between political economic conditions, institutional priorities, and workers in motion. Through it all, I trace how graduate workers are defined by powerful institutional actors, as well as how graduate workers define themselves. In the process, I analyze how rhetorics of decision-making power-sharing surface and recede in union campaigns in order to better understand why the issue

of graduate labor involvement in decision-making continues to vex administrators and university governing boards. By illuminating decision-making as an essential feature of the ongoing contestation between academic workers and university administrators, this dissertation urges the academic labor movement and everyone with a stake in higher education to think clearly and seriously about how universities make decisions, and in whose interests. A different university premised on democratic control of decision-making is possible, as immortalized in red graffiti on the side of a nondescript campus wall, when we “remember that this university belongs to us.”⁶¹

⁶¹ Akwugo Emejulu, “Another University Is Possible,” Verso Books, January 12, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3044-another-university-is-possible>.

Chapter Two

Defining Graduate Workers as Decision-Makers in the TAA's 1970 Unionization Campaign

The first strike ever conducted by graduate student workers began in the early hours of March 16, 1970 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Starting at 3 a.m., TAs and sympathetic undergraduates picketed in front of campus buildings and loading docks, while delivery truck drivers and campus bus drivers, represented by the Teamsters Union, honored the strikers' picket lines. Not all TAs joined in on the strike, though many did. On the strike's second day, the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA) reported that less than twenty percent of students attended classes in the major Letters & Science classroom buildings. As with most labor stoppages throughout history, striking TAs were threatened with workplace retaliation; the TAA was issued a court order on April 3 to return to work that its members summarily ignored. The three-week labor stoppage ended on April 7 when TAA members accepted the university's latest contract proposal. The UW Board of Regents approved the contract on April 10, making TAs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison the first graduate assistants in the country to negotiate an independent contract (i.e. one created without a national union).

What were TAs on strike for? In part, they wanted a contract that included standard workplace protections: health insurance, a codified grievance procedure, position appointment guarantees, transparency in evaluations and student files. However, the work stoppage was also about less obvious workplace controls, most notably what the TAA named "educational planning": the right of TAs and undergraduate students to exert decision-making power in the courses that they taught and in which they were enrolled. This included redistributing decision-making power over things like course offerings and content, pedagogical initiatives and

techniques, and the selection of texts and teaching material.¹ The demand for curricular decision-making control stemmed from TAs' discontent with the way that university education was administered: TAA members in the History department commented that "the ideas behind educational planning started when we found we didn't like what we were doing to our students. We felt that learning in our classrooms was not a meaningful social process, but harshly individualistic, full of competition, fear, and lack of trust." From its origins in education reform, the issue of educational planning took on new importance when communicated as an issue of TA rights and workplace decision-making control.

Educational planning was the centerpiece of the TAA's strike platform and easily the most contentious platform demand; in addition to garnering opposition from a majority of faculty and administrators, some TAs found educational planning to be an inappropriate demand for a labor union that should, they argued, be more focused on basic economic issues. To the radical TAs leading the TAA, however, educational planning represented the leading edge of a new kind of unionism that went beyond narrowly-defined bread-and-butter issues and also sought to reform social institutions.² As Mark Van Ells recounts, the TAA's determination to strike in March 1970 over educational planning, even after the university had agreed to a number of the TAA's other demands, suggests that they were not content with limiting the union's vision to economic issues; they were intent on reforming the administration, governance, and purpose of the university itself. Union leaders knew, however, that any chance at doing so would necessarily

¹ Mark D. Van Ells, "More than a Union: The Teaching Assistants Association and Its 1970 Strike against the University of Wisconsin," *The Michigan Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (1999): 112.

² By "radical TAs," I refer to TAs who came out of the New Left movements of the 1960s and who led the TAA with a broadly-conceived Marxist analysis of class conflict. The New Left was a term for the heterogeneous movements for civil and political rights, feminism, gay rights, workers' rights, and more.

involve, at some point, an overwhelming “withdrawal of labor which disrupted the training functions of the University.”³

Though an overwhelming labor stoppage over something as divisive as educational planning was not guaranteed at the outset, the TAA was invested from its beginnings in reforming the purpose and content of a college education. Four years earlier in 1966, a group of about 35 TAs had first gathered at a sit-in protesting the Vietnam War draft. As the arbiters of student grades (which determined draft deferment status), graduate TAs shouldered a particularly heavy psychic load and felt a responsibility to the delivery of university education. They had no collective avenues for providing input; they found that their position was not accurately represented in conversations about either faculty or students. Further, they saw their powerlessness vis-a-vis grades as a workplace concern, a result of their lack of input in decisions involving their labor. From that group emerged a core of TA activists attracted to the idea of unionism as an avenue to, among other things, reimagine the purpose of a university education that focused on student agency and humanity rather than industrial prerogative. They shaped the TAA into the first graduate assistant union in the country to go on strike to enshrine shared decision-making mechanisms in its first contract.

At first, however, leaders in the union faced major hurdles—ideological, material, rhetorical—in persuading their fellow TAs of the necessity of a union for teaching assistants, let alone a bargaining platform that potentially included redistributing workplace decision-making control. The union had to confront an academic system and power structure that implicitly and explicitly circulated the rhetoric of: graduate students as (entitled, privileged, unqualified)

³ Paul Schollaert, “The TAA as a Counter Institution,” TAA Newsletter Vol. 4 No. 7, December, 11, 1970, folder “Newsletters-1970,” TAA Archives, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

apprentices rather than workers; a teaching assistantship as a “reward” for being a good student rather than a job; and the University of Wisconsin–Madison as a benevolent force in the city and state that made decisions on behalf of the interests of Wisconsin students and citizens rather than its industries.

Taken together, the rhetoric of graduate studies in America’s universities—and more specifically at the University of Wisconsin—made public discourse that advocated for concerted labor activity by Wisconsin graduate TAs especially fraught. Moreover, the representation of labor unions in the popular imagination, then and now, couldn’t easily integrate the call for curricular and pedagogical decision-making powers that graduate TAs at Wisconsin were demanding; organized labor had long been depicted as fighting largely on behalf of workers’ economic issues and workplace protections, and educational planning did not fit within this rhetorical construction. If TAA leaders wanted to marshal sufficient bodies out of the classrooms and onto the picket lines in the case that a contract agreement could not be reached, they would need to persuade a significant majority of TAs that their interests were incapable of being represented by the university system and its administrators—and furthermore that the union’s pursuit of a university system governed by participatory decision-making that specifically included TA participation was in TAs’ own interest. In other words, they would need to transcend the status of what political theorist Nancy Fraser deems a “weak public”—a counterpublic whose “deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making”—and instead constitute an alternative power base through which to redistribute the decision-making power at the university, especially as it concerned TA

labor.⁴ This, I contend, is the project of forming a working-class counterpublic representing the interests of graduate TAs in the university system.

To do so, TAA members engaged in extensive consciousness-raising work across a multitude of publications: a twice-monthly newsletter, a critical pedagogy journal, letters to the editor, working papers distributed to members through departmental representatives, and more. Through these channels, the TAA presented a structural analysis of the university system and the TA's place and conditions within it, one of the first instances in any American university of such an analysis from the standpoint of a teaching assistant. They articulated the structural conditions of the TA's exploitation and domination in the university system: their "inability to determine the conditions of [their] employment" predicated on the university's interest in maintaining unilateral control of the conditions by which students were prepared for American industries.⁵ And they identified in whose interests the university operated and, noted TAA stewards, demystified the "many myths...concerning its structure and functioning which becloud the real situation."⁶ In so doing, the TAA ultimately did more than just persuade TAs of the need for a union; they constructed a rhetorical foundation that allowed them to both delegitimize the administration's largely-unquestioned decision-making mandate and frame educational planning as fundamentally a labor issue. To quote just one picket line sign from 1970, when TAs went on strike, many did so with the belief that "TAs Teach Lessons, UW Lessens Teaching."

⁴ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), 75.

⁵ "The Teaching Assistants Association of the University of Wisconsin Madison," September 1968, folder "Newsletters," TAA Archives, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

⁶ "T.A.A. Working Paper - Section I," 1969-1970, folder "TAA: Miscellaneous Historical Documents," TAA Archives, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

Drawing from TA-authored public-facing documents both in the years leading up to and during the UW-TAA contract negotiations of 1969-1970—which culminated in the aforementioned strike—this chapter analyzes how TAA leaders rhetorically constructed the union’s and TA’s investment in participation in decision-making processes at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I demonstrate how the TAA shifted TA consciousness toward a new articulation of the graduate worker subject as a classed, agential worker within the university system. Extending rhetorical scholarship on working-class standpoint theory, proletarian publics, and consciousness-raising, I argue that the TAA mediated the experience of an inchoate collective of graduate TAs divided geographically and disciplinarily through rhetoric that communicated TA interests from a working-class standpoint. This rhetoric articulated the structural conditions of TA labor in the university system and identified access to and control over decision-making as a first step toward transcending these conditions. This new conception of the graduate worker as having discrete class interests undergirded the rhetorical force of the union’s demand for decision-making power in those decisions affecting TA labor. Further, I contend that the TAA’s entry into contract negotiations with the university allowed the union to delegitimize the top-down governance structure of the university administration by undermining trust in the administration’s capacity to act in good faith in the interests of TAs. In so doing, graduate TAs determined it was in their own interest to strike for a contract that would enshrine participatory decision-making and other workplace protections, and that the union was the best vehicle to achieve that aim.⁷

⁷ This chapter is not an analysis of how or why the TAA did not ultimately succeed in enshrining educational planning mechanisms in its first contract—there were reasons beyond their ability to persuade graduate workers to strike, notably a particular division among faculty.

Beyond this specific case study, analyzing how the TAA interceded in this landscape contributes to rhetorical studies in three ways. First, it expands the study of counterpublicity to account for how classed rhetorics contribute to counterpublic formation. Second, through an archival rhetorical analysis that centers the circulation of classed discourses that ultimately led to the execution of a three-week strike, it contributes to longstanding conversations in the field about consciousness-raising and the role of rhetoric in cohering disparate actors into a shared project. Finally, the rhetorical tactics used by the TAA offer a potential model for contemporary working-class counterpublics as they engage in consciousness-raising work. In what follows, I first draw out the theories of the proletarian public sphere, working-class standpoint, and consciousness-raising, which offer a theoretical anchor for the case study that follows. Doing so allows me to integrate these under-theorized concepts into contemporary conversations around rhetoric's capacity to intervene in labor issues.

Counterpublic Consciousness-Raising and Workers' Experience

When concerned TAs met in 1966 to discuss a collective response to the Vietnam War draft, they constituted a “public” in the “public sphere,” an arena (material or mediated) in which, writes Nancy Fraser, “political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.”⁸ The image of the public sphere articulated by Jürgen Habermas is one of “the coming together of private people into a public” under the ideal of participatory parity—what Habermas deems “the parity of ‘common humanity.’”⁹ In her influential critique of the Habermasian public sphere, Fraser identifies how such publics constitutively excluded subjugated groups—women, workers,

⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), 56.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 10. print, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 35-36.

the landless, people of color, among others. She contends that the public sphere relied on a separation between public and private life that advantaged bourgeois interests. Fraser's project identifies how "subaltern counterpublics" produce oppositional discourses and create arenas to excavate discourses from "specialized discursive arenas." Her scholarship offers a model by which scholars can examine how counterpublics contest dominant narratives and center their own definitions of their identities, interests, and needs.

One way counterpublics do so is through rhetorical processes of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising, writes Tasha Dubriwny, indicates the "process of giving individual experiences new meanings by moving them into the realm of social reality."¹⁰ Consciousness-raising connects individually-felt oppressions with structural inequalities through the deployment of an experiential epistemology, what Dubriwny terms a rhetoric with "lived experience at its epistemic core."¹¹ Such rhetorical deployments can lead to the circulation of new public vocabularies that re-frame individual experiences to encompass a collective relation to dominant narratives. By articulating those experiences, Dubriwny writes, consciousness-raising can transcend to the level of a collective rhetoric that creates a new social reality, the production of novel ways to make sense of the world. It is not just systemic critique, but lived experience and testimony too that can collectively articulate a subjugated position. As I argue in this case study, TAA worker-organizers sought to elevate workers' experiences of powerlessness and exploitation into a shared social reality that would cohere rhetorical force around graduate workers' grievances addressing exclusion from decision-making. In so doing, they engaged in

¹⁰ Tasha N. Dubriwny, "Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings' Abortion Speak-Out of 1969," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 4 (November 2005), 401.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 396.

class consciousness-raising efforts that situated graduate workers within the university labor system, entering the public sphere constituted by the university and its environs to clash with university administrators' discursive and material efforts to undermine the union's demands.

Indeed, workers' class consciousness-raising rhetorics are not neutral interjections into the public sphere, but enter into a discursive space overdetermined by class interests. In their 1972 work *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge evaluate the mechanisms by which workers' lived experience (*Erfahrung* in German) is systematically excluded and made illegible in the mass media and consumer culture of the bourgeois public sphere.¹² Negt and Kluge contend that the bourgeois public sphere, a historically-contingent form of publicity that arose in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, relies on a "facade of legitimation" that claims to represent the social totality and that yet constitutively negates the social experiences of two arenas that are necessary to the reproduction of civil society: industrial relations and family socialization.¹³ That is, the public sphere excludes and mystifies the life interests and lived experiences of workers in their relationship to capital and production. As a result, they write, "What one is allowed to feel, express, communicate, as a realistic person is molded by the modes of interaction in the factory, in everyday life, and above all, transmitted by the mass media."¹⁴ The bourgeois public sphere

¹² Experience, as used by Negt and Kluge, denotes the interplay between individual and collective experience, "the matrix that mediates individual perception and social horizons of meaning, including the collective experience of alienation, isolation and privatization." (Hansen, "Foreword," xvii-xviii). Put another way, experience translates multiple, heterogeneous, unpredictable individual encounters into a system of shared meaning and interpretation at the collective level.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Radical Thinkers (London ; New York: Verso, 2016).

¹³ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁴ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 31.

exerts powerful pressures on public perception and conventional wisdom that make class consciousness-raising difficult and render the worker's experience incomprehensible. Worker-organizers engaged in class consciousness-raising nonetheless attempt to translate common individual experiences otherwise excluded from public expression into a collective social reality.

Workers experience the erasure and obfuscation of their experiences by the rhetorical activity of their employers and mass media; in the university system, workers' interests come up against what Marc Bousquet calls the "pervasive information warfare" of university administrations.¹⁵ This explains, in part, why workers at particular worksites that share common interests do not necessarily ensure the constitution of a working-class counterpublic that apprehends its situation. Rather, a working-class counterpublic produces oppositional discourses that name exclusions from decision-making in order to facilitate in workers what Dana Cloud and Kathleen Feyh term "collective self-consciousness of one's class position."¹⁶ Rhetorically, this self-consciousness is mediated through a collective recognition of exclusion from decision-making arenas. Through this, working-class counterpublics might develop from an inchoate group of people who share the same relationship to capital but are not organized along those lines into that group of people who recognize their class position and collectively pursue their own interests. TAA worker-organizers, for example, spent significant energy both explicating a theory of graduate labor in the university labor system and refuting administrative efforts to obscure the relationship between the university and graduate labor. The result was a collective of

¹⁵ Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 31.

¹⁶ Dana L. Cloud and Kathleen Eaton Feyh, "Reason in Revolt: Emotional Fidelity and Working Class Standpoint in the 'Internationale,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (August 8, 2015), 312.

graduate workers who came to recognize the site of their power in the university—their labor—and who acted collectively.

The rhetorical expression of workers' experiences arises from what Cloud and Feyh, through Lukács, call a "working-class standpoint."¹⁷ It is from this standpoint, they argue, that workers' interests gains communicative and material unity, thus enabling working-class rhetors to recognize and communicate their agency as a class and struggle ideologically for a greater labor consciousness. For Cloud and Feyh, a working-class standpoint is the view from which the social relations under capitalism become manifest for workers, and the view from which the class interests central to working-class uprisings can gain communicative and material unity. However, such a standpoint is not an *a priori* possession of workers. As Stuart Hall, echoing Gramsci, contends, while workers share a real interest in contesting their exploitation, the unity of classes "has to be *produced*—constructed, created—as a result of specific economic, political, and ideological practices. It can never be taken as automatic."¹⁸ Or, as Cloud notes, "it must be rhetorically achieved in the domains of organisation, education and struggle."¹⁹ Indeed, this standpoint provides the epistemological *foundation*, but not a guarantee, on which the transition from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself' becomes possible. Cloud writes that "the standpoint rests as an epistemological potential that affords political actors an opportunity to mediate working-class experience, bringing the particularity of that experience into shared systems of meaning and explanation."²⁰ Put another way, communication through a working-class

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986), 14.

¹⁹ Dana L. Cloud, "Standpoint, Mediation and the Working-Class Public Sphere," *Javnost - The Public* 25, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2018), 55.

²⁰ Ibid, 53.

standpoint has the capacity to forward non-bourgeois politics and social relations rooted in democratic publicity that recognizes and legitimates workers' social experience. Speaking from this standpoint affords rhetors a rhetorical mode through which to apprehend and communicate workers' experiences that remain otherwise obscured.

In the case study that follows, I demonstrate how TAA worker-organizers sought to raise class-consciousness through their publicity around educational planning by deploying rhetorical interventions from a working-class standpoint. Their rhetorical activity indicates that the worker-organizers' consistent use of a working-class standpoint mediated TAs' experiences of exploitation and domination and turned it toward the development of alternative relations in the university system. In so doing, I argue, worker-organizers were able to cohere a working-class counterpublic whose main arguments around access to decision-making relied on delegitimizing both dominant public perceptions of the university labor system and administrators' capacity to act in the best interests of graduate workers.

The TAA's Rhetorical Framing of Educational Planning as a Workplace Issue

From the TAA's founding at the anti-Vietnam War draft sit-ins in May of 1966, at which radical TAs authored a document calling for the university to refuse cooperation with the Selective Service System, it was clear that TAs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison were invested in reimagining TA-taught undergraduate education. As David Fleming records in *From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties*, the mid- to late-1960s saw increased efforts from TAs at UW to take ownership over general education courses from which well-funded faculty members were withdrawing. As the TAA built its presence among graduate TAs, and as it pivoted towards official union recognition by the University and collective bargaining agreements, it was required to cohere its central platform demands, employing a

network of departmental liaisons to encourage participation in shaping the union’s strategy, issues, and platform. Indeed, over its founding years, the TAA’s rhetoric around workplace decision-making reflected both a willingness to adapt as its analyses sharpened and a commitment to participatory debate in meetings and in print. In this section, I trace the rhetorical construction of graduate workers’ relationship to educational planning and university decision-making in the first four years of its existence, identifying how its discursive transformation across these years evidenced a radical labor union coming to inhabit, sometimes uncomfortably and sometimes with confidence, a working-class standpoint that afforded them a location from which to challenge the legitimacy of university decision-making processes.

Changing the Definition of Graduate Labor

In the Fall of 1967, one year after its official formation at the aforementioned antiwar sit-in, the TAA produced and distributed a beginning-of-year pamphlet that featured on the front a striking image of Lady Forward, the unofficial patron saint of Madison, holding a glowing torch and overlooking the city.²¹ The words “organize,” “TAA,” and “One Big Union” were written on her sash in large block letters. The contents inside detailed the fledgling organization’s formation the year prior and included sections that one would find in the literature from an industrial labor union on: grievances, job control, contracts, union recognition procedures, and implementation of priorities. Though the TAA was not at the time a labor union that was officially recognized as such by its employer—it wouldn’t be officially recognized until May 1969—it was laying the

²¹ Lady Forward is the namesake of the “Forward” statue located at the Wisconsin State Capitol building; the statue, completed in 1893, represents “devotion and progress,” according to its sculptress, Jean Pond Miner.

“‘Forward’ Statue,” Wisconsin Historical Society, March 2, 2006, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2752>.

groundwork to be seen as an authoritative and representative organization by its audience and potential bargaining unit: graduate TAs at the university.²²

Inside this pamphlet, the authors presented a justification for the TAA's creation the year prior: TAs' inability to engage collectively with campus decision-makers on matters relevant to their work as teaching assistants. The authors presented a structural account of the position of the TA in the university system, inhabiting the rhetoric, history, and standpoint of labor. They wrote,

In terms of our teaching jobs...a more accurate analogy can be drawn between teaching assistants and industrial or service workers. Workers perform relatively fixed tasks for a fixed salary or wage and have no say in the setting of either, except through collective bargaining. Teaching assistants have, at the present time, no way they can influence the college's allocation of work-load or the state legislature's determination of wages. Like industrial or service workers, graduate students are forced to operate within a limited (University) market in which the teaching assistantship is the one readily available job that allows them to work on their degrees and still support themselves....If teaching assistants can build a strong organization the dangers of isolation of the individual and job insecurity, which are among the hazards of contesting work grievances and advocating educational reforms, will be effectively removed.²³

Rhetorically, this invocation of a stereotypical image of working-class laborers—industrial and service workers—served an important function in the union's attempts to articulate its members' position in the university and the conditions of alienation and domination that they experienced. By drawing lines of similarity to workers who were more readily identifiable *as workers* in the popular imagination, the TAA sought to illuminate the subjugated position of graduate TAs and situate the TA within the rhetorical tradition of labor. Indeed, while some TAs may have bristled

²² At the time, in order to be recognized as the exclusive bargaining agent by the University of Wisconsin—which would allow the TAA to negotiate a contract with the university on behalf of UW teaching assistants—the union had to hold a representation election overseen by the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission in which they received a majority of affirmative votes. The election was held May 15-16, 1969, at which they won 77 percent of the vote campus-wide (“The Structure Agreement,” 1).

²³ “Teaching Assistants Association” pamphlet, Fall 1967, TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

at the comparison, the depictions in how the workplaces are structured to dispossess workers and how decision-making eludes them pointed to genuine similarities. The conditions governing their work, rather than the work itself, became the point of comparison. This allowed the TAA to raise consciousness around how TAs shared a common position not just with *other* types of workers across industries, but also with other TAs across the university—irrespective of department, discipline, or campus building.

In the same pamphlet, the TAA authors also established themselves as a moral authority by identifying the quality of undergraduate education at the university as a “primary concern.” They wrote, “We are concerned because the University’s function is primarily in the training of students to perform jobs preselected in response to the requirements of our economic system rather than developing the students’ full potential as human beings.”²⁴ Rhetorically, the union provided a clear juxtaposition between their vision of education and the university’s by identifying the UW as an appendage of the industrial capitalist society from which it was so often seen as separate (a notion that was strengthened by phrases like the “the ivory tower” or “town-gown”). This move positioned the University of Wisconsin as, writes Steven Zorn, an institution that functioned as “a basic industry, part of the infrastructure of the American economy” rather than an “intellectually oriented institution.”²⁵ As such, the TAA’s stated concern for undergraduate education opened up the University to critique on its own terrain—education—which established the union in a position of moral authority on the subject. The union continued to undermine the university’s rhetorical claims to authority on educational

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Steven Zorn, “Unions on Campus,” in *Academic Super Markets*, ed. Philip G. Altbach, Robert S. Laufer, and Sheila McVey (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1971), 289.

matters as its campaign for recognition continued, challenging the taken-for granted arrangements and opening space to imagine alternative relations.

In an effort to connect the working conditions of TAs to the quality of education offered at the University of Wisconsin, TAA authors argued that TAs' powerlessness was a result of their "split role as teacher and student." In September 1968, in its beginning-of-the-year pamphlet to incoming graduate students, the TAA attempted to offer an alternative definition of the graduate student worker: "[O]ur inability to determine the conditions of our employment and the nature of the product we make reflects the authoritarian aspects of our student existence. It is in this unified role of teacher-as-student that we must work in the present toward a more critical and human education."²⁶ The image of the TA as a "teacher-as-student" reflected an early attempt by the union to synthesize the student and teacher identities of TAs as something in-between that exceeded the rhetorics of either. Importantly, this rhetorical construction of the TA's split role was something that TAs themselves had no control over defining; UW had the ability to treat TAs as students or as teachers depending on its marginal benefit to the university. In other words, the TAA's attempt to articulate a "unified role of teacher-as-student" represented an effort to assert control over the definition and articulation of teaching assistants in the university system; scholars like Gerard Hauser and Phaedra Pezzullo contend that such counterpublicity demythologizes authority and undermines already existing discourses in ways that open up spaces for challengers to realign public perceptions of legitimacy and authority.²⁷

²⁶ "The Teaching Assistants Association of the University of Wisconsin."

²⁷ Gerard Hauser, "Rethinking Deliberative Democracy," in *Rhetoric and Democracy: Pedagogical and Political Practices*, ed. Todd F. McDorman and David M. Timmerman, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 233; Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "Resisting 'National Breast Cancer Awareness Month': The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and Their Cultural Performances," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (November 2003).

Further, by invoking the “conditions of [their] employment” and the “product [they] make,” the union deployed language that aligned its standpoint with industrial labor organizations who “produce” and who are, it follows, entitled to a say in their working conditions. Ultimately, the TAA’s linking of recognizable rhetorics of organized labor with an alternative definition of the graduate student worker allowed it to legitimize its push toward official recognition by TAs as both a union representing their unique location and class identity in the university and as a base for legitimate criticism of the university’s claims to sole authority regarding education.

Up to this point, the rhetoric deployed by the TAA that championed TA decision-making in educational planning was largely theoretical. The union did not have a formal, contractual relationship with the university that necessitated concrete language around how educational planning would be implemented at the department or university level. As such, much of the discussion around educational planning in union newsletters and pamphlets had a consciousness-raising function. This is not to say that such rhetoric was immaterial, however; rather, it was the requisite *precondition* for the formation of a working-class counterpublic that could translate the rhetorical higher ground into a show of material and embodied strength in the form of concerted labor activity. Put another way, the rhetoric deployed by TAA leaders in the union’s early publicity served a consciousness-raising function in its efforts to marry the issues of graduate worker powerlessness, TA unionization, and educational quality at the University of Wisconsin. Such language sought to mediate the experiences of teaching assistants through language that exposed dominant public articulations of the TA subject as, to quote Brouwer and Paulesc,

“imperfect, incomplete, or, more fatally, delusional.”²⁸ In so doing, the union made it possible to imagine TAs as agential actors in their workplaces, cohered and organized through the TAA.

Ultimately, though it was far from guaranteed, the gathering pressure and insistence from the union forced the university to agree to include issues of educational decision-making within the scope of bargainable items. On April 26, 1969, it was announced that the two sides had reached a “structure agreement,” a document that outlined 1) the procedures under which the TAA would successfully obtain recognition by the state and UW to begin contract negotiations (i.e. a supervised election in which the majority of voting TAs voted for the TAA as their exclusive bargaining representative), and 2) the issues that were considered appropriate and accepted for collective bargaining in the case that the TAA were to be recognized as the exclusive bargaining representative. The structure agreement included the following section confirming as much:

VIII. It is in the interest of the University and of the Teaching Assistant to make sure that there are mechanisms in each Department to give him an opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in the educational planning for courses in which he shares a responsibility. To insure that there are such mechanisms and that they operate effectively is a proper subject for collective bargaining.

Alongside each section of the structure agreement, TAA authors included a brief explanation and analysis. Regarding the above section, they wrote: “This means that the University must bargain with the Union about guidelines or models on how TAs should participate in the courses they teach.”²⁹ The TAA identified this as their “really substantive ‘job control’ clause,...a

²⁸ Daniel Brouwer and Marie-Louise Paulesc, “Counterpublic Theory Goes Global,” in *What Democracy Looks Like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics*, ed. Christina R Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 80.

²⁹ “TAA Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 5,” May 1969, TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

pioneering...though necessary (all Unions should have it) provision.”³⁰ In situating educational planning within the context of job control here, the TAA offered a counterpoint to moralistic arguments that might center on graduate TAs’ lack of qualifications, or faculty members’ exclusive right, to contribute to the intellectual or pedagogical approach in the classroom. Rhetorically, claiming educational planning as a workplace issue owed to a graduate worker allowed the TAA to reframe it as something other than a demand of aggrieved ruffians who were overstepping their “place” in the university. Instead, educational planning was a matter of “job control,” which brought the standpoint and deployment of organized labor rhetorics closer to actualization. Such an argument is potentially forceful because it recognized the rights of workers to fair treatment and certain workplace protections, just as other power-sharing mechanisms like shared governance were also taking shape (see Chapter Four for more).

Lest I haven’t made it clear, the TAA’s pursuit of educational planning as a means of shifting decision-making power in the university was in service of a larger goal: to reshape the value system of the university and undergraduate education. TAA leaders had long been articulating how the university’s overarching mission was to produce workers for the industrial system that led to a disempowering education for students; by shifting how and by whom decisions were made, the TAA imagined that they could undermine the legitimacy of administrators’ claims to represent the interests of students and bring about a different university altogether that promoted a relevant and humanistic education. To do this, TAA leaders saw the necessity of changing the calculus behind “who controls the University.”³¹ In a postmortem on the 1970 TAA strike written the year following the strike, members of the TAA’s Education

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “T.A.A. Working Paper - Section I.”

Committee (which had introduced and workshopped the educational planning clause in the TAA’s contract proposals) laid out the connection they had been trying to make with the educational planning clause—a connection between decision-making controls, the imbrication of the university and the industrial system, and the quality of education at UW:

For many of us the ideas behind educational planning started when we found we didn’t like what we were doing to our students. We felt that learning in our classrooms was not a meaningful social process, but harshly individualistic, full of competition, fear, and lack of trust...[W]e heard the phrase [“faculty prerogative” or “faculty responsibility”] continually whenever we asked for the right to let students direct their education...If we were going to change anything, it would have to be by shifting the base of power in the University. With recognition of the TAA as exclusive bargaining agent, we saw the union as an alternative power base through which we might work. We included in the contract a clause on educational planning as a start.

In this extended passage, the TAA authors connected the links between the atomizing effect of the university classroom, the administration’s declaration of “faculty prerogative” over the classroom to deflect graduate TAs’ attempts to change the university’s pedagogical status quo, and the TAA as a vehicle for providing an “alternative power base” from which to articulate and execute an alternative vision of undergraduate education and the university system rooted in participatory decision-making and student agency. Decision-making power was the ends, while educational planning was the means. Rhetorically, the TAA’s framing of educational reform through the lens of workplace relations allowed them to produce sympathy among TAs for a working-class standpoint to the university system that identified collective TA action as a way forward.

At the same time, this remained something for which not all TAA members were willing to stick their necks out. In an environment that saw organized labor as primarily a vehicle for economic advancement and TAs as largely a privileged class separated from the issues that organized labor advocated for, it makes sense that not all TAs were convinced by the TAA’s

argument that educational planning represented a workplace issue. An October 1969 article in the Newsletter titled “Is the TAA A Bread-And-Butter Union?”, written by Ira Shor, noted:

Several TAs [at a September 1969 membership meeting] expressed the belief that our union should stress ‘bread and butter’ issues (an economist position) over policy-making or worker-control demands. They remarked that...the building of a mass union would depend not on winning power over educational planning or building resistance to racism and imperialism, but rather on our union proposing and winning an unideological and privileged economic position for its constituency.³²

The tension that Shor noted here is one between the traditional image of organized labor as a vehicle for economic advancement and the “new unionism” that the TAA sought to usher into the education industry in which unions were vehicles for larger system-level changes. No doubt this tension was felt deeply by many TAs who saw unions predominantly as organizations to secure economic benefit. And yet, what Shor and other TAA authors were arguing for was a different paradigm of class relations hitherto unseen in higher education: a more democratic university by way of “a greater penetration of decisions affecting the work we perform and our right to have a say in how it is performed.”³³ Educational planning—in addition to contract demands around class size maximums, teaching evaluations, work speed-ups and the creation of a Workers Review Council to handle grievances—was a vehicle to introduce decision-making parity across asymmetrical power arrangements in the university, but it required that graduate TAs see it as such, and that they see themselves, rather than the university, as the ones to do it. Requiring, in other words, that they become not only conscious of the class relations governing the university, but also willing to act collectively. This was to be the TAA’s rhetorical task

³² Ira Shor, “TAA Newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 2,” October 6, 1969, TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

³³ “Shut It Down?,” February 1970, folder “1970 Strike,” TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

moving forward—persuading TAs that only their collective and unified involvement in intra-union activity would ensure that the union could wrest greater concessions from the university.

In this section, I have attempted to show how the TAA in its formative founding years produced consciousness-raising rhetoric that aimed to articulate a new definition of the graduate TA as a worker and as something other than a teacher or student in order to argue for their right to take part in workplace decision-making. It did so by casting the university as an employer existing within wider capitalist industrial relations and themselves as synonymous with more recognizable working-class actors who subsequently had the right to determine the conditions of their workplace. In so doing, they sought to both persuade graduate workers to identify as workers and reimagine participatory decision-making processes in the university through a collectively bargained contract. In the next section, I detail the ways that members of the TAA Bargaining Team communicated to TAA members about the bargaining process, illuminating and providing evidence of the administration’s bad-faith engagement and obstruction. They did so in order to shift TA consciousness as the union bargaining team approached a stalemate with administrators that would require the union to translate rhetorical exasperation into a showing of TAs’ collective power.

Communicating Administrative Obstruction

After the two sides settled on a structure agreement, the rhetoric from TAA leaders quickly pivoted to a confrontational rhetoric that sought to engender a combative stance in TAs’ perceptions of administrative good-will. In the same May 1969 newsletter as above that detailed the UW-TAA structure agreement, TAA President Bob Muehlenkamp wrote in his “President’s Report”: “Let me make clear what it means if we accept this agreement and win the election: WE HAVE BEEN PERMITTED TO BEGIN TO FIGHT. The struggle to better our working

conditions so we can work with students and faculty is only beginning...At this point we have simply formed a tool; if it isn't used it will, like any tool, rust away. We must now turn that tool into an effective weapon.”³⁴ As the TAA shifted toward establishing a formal relationship with the University and its negotiating team, union leaders adopted language that sought to convince rank-and-file members that their continued involvement and participation in the union was part and parcel of the negotiation process. Rhetorically, this reminder served to guard against the dissolution of momentum in developing a cohesive vehicle for advancing TAs' interests in light of the university's decision to negotiate with the union. At the same time, it sought to channel individual grievances of TAs in the university system into a collective rhetoric that would persuade TAs to engage in collective action against a shared antagonist.

The TAA's securing of a structure agreement with the University—one that included educational planning as a bargainable demand—did not mean that University representatives would bargain with them in good faith, nor that they would walk back their insistence that educational planning remain under the sole purview of faculty. It was in the interest of the university to prolong the process in order to dispirit TAs and peel them away from support of the TAA's position. Indeed, as bargaining between the TAA's and the University of Wisconsin's respective bargaining teams got underway in the summer of 1969, it became clear that the administration was intent on obstructing the process at every opportunity. As the TAA laid out in a pamphlet titled “The Structure Agreement”:

Having agreed to bargain under the structure agreement at the height of a crisis, the University Administration has, in subsequent negotiations, attempted to re-define it to serve the administration's interest, to define it out of existence when it doesn't serve their interests, and has blatantly violated it...[I]t is crucial to understand the conditions under which we agreed to bargain and how the administration has used this strategy to avoid

³⁴ “TAA Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 5,” May 1969, folder “1969 Newsletters,” TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

meaningful bargaining over the conditions of employment and even to erode the rights that TAs had thought they had already secured.³⁵

In what follows, TAA authors recorded the administration's various obfuscations and misrepresentations that had happened at the bargaining table. Updates such as this were not uncommon for the duration of the bargaining effort; the TAA would report in detail how the university bargaining team sought to obstruct progress and walk back previous promises. Beyond the clear change in tone, this document sought to expose to TAA members the lack of good-faith engagement in the decision-making process on the part of the university's negotiating team, which represented a "powerful participant" and representative of the state's interests.³⁶ The TAA's dialectical analysis—noting how the University conceded at a moment of heightened struggle and then attempted to rescind these concessions as the struggle receded—attempted to inoculate graduate TAs into an understanding of the university as strategically committed to undermining the union's efforts. In so doing, and in using the language of "interests," the TAA sought to deploy rhetoric that could coalesce a shared collective identity rooted in both the antagonisms between TAs and their employers and antipathy toward the administration's negotiation tactics. This, then, would provide a means of identifying with the union's platform and position, which would ultimately bolster their ability to call for some sort of workplace action.

In overpowering the TAA's bargaining team with delay after procedural delay, the administration sought to prolong agreement on a contract, anticipating that doing so would diminish the ideological and material support for the TAA's obstinacy in the face of an

³⁵ "The Structure Agreement," TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

³⁶ Robert Asen, "Representing the State in South Central Los Angeles," in *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 154.

institution like the University of Wisconsin that had a progressive reputation. Indeed, the university entered the negotiations with an extensive communications program under their control and with the ability to marginalize the TAA's bargaining efforts or portray the fledgling union as unrepresentative or unruly. It is for this reason that the TAA Newsletter was such a crucial communication device in the TAA's construction of a working-class counterpublic during the contract negotiation period. It granted the TAA unmediated communication with its membership in which it sought to offer both a structural and moral critique of the university system unfiltered by administrator prerogative. Whereas pre-negotiation decisions around platform language and the inclusion or exclusion of certain positions were previously made in TAA membership body meetings and departmental TA meetings, the conversations between administrators and TAA representatives at the bargaining table necessarily became less participatory to the wider TAA body. Aside from word-of-mouth, it appears that the Bargaining Team Reports faithfully detailed in the biweekly TAA Newsletters remained the only written record regarding updates from the bargaining table. Rhetorically, the Newsletter served as a public-facing document of the UW bargaining team's ongoing obstruction of the negotiation process, which served to both delegitimize the perceived benevolence of the UW's top-down decision-making hierarchy and diminish TA faith in the university's capacity to meaningfully account for TAs in their decisions. Indeed, if logic is an effective rhetorical tool, so, too, is resentment.

The TAA made every effort to detail each instance of administrative obstructionism, even if it meant going outside the TAA Newsletter to do so. The TAA Bargaining Team took to the student newspaper *The Daily Cardinal* in November 1969 to pen a public letter directly to Chancellor Young correcting his rhetoric that charged the TAA with being "more interested in

discussing ‘imperialism’ and ‘other ideological matters’ than terms and conditions of employment.” They contended:

Since negotiations began, the TAA has submitted nearly thirty concrete contract proposals dealing with the terms and conditions of employment of teaching assistants. These proposals deal with such diverse but job related topics as workloads, grievance procedure, work rules, discipline, discharge, evaluations, educational planning, length of appointment, seniority, work surroundings, health plan, union-university relations, human rights, secret files, sick leave and many more issues. Fifteen of the TAA proposals have been revised one or more times in the course of bargaining... Since the University Negotiating Team has consistently refused to meet more than four hours a week, you must admit that we would be hard pressed to go beyond the scope of the above demands and bargaining activities in the course of negotiations.³⁷

This language is effective insofar as it reverses the traditional depiction of the TAA as unserious, immature, or unrealistic. Instead, it is the administration that is portrayed as unserious. In depicting the university on these terms, the TAA deployed the image of an out-of-touch, resistant administrative team as a way to affectively bind their members to the TAA’s ideological commitments to shared decision-making. Indeed, the TAA curated a catalog of administrative disrespect and shared it publicly with its members. As a result, the union put itself in a position to undermine administrative credibility and be recognized as itself an institution to be taken seriously in the university system.

As contract negotiations began to wind down toward the end of 1969, TAA leaders converted administrative obstinacy into a nascent rallying cry for graduate TAs by presenting the successful culmination of the bargaining process as something that could only be decided by teaching assistants putting themselves into motion. In the TAA Newsletter of November 1969, TAA bargaining team member Jim Marketti put the decisions facing graduate TAs bluntly:

It is time for the membership to begin thinking about and discussing the fact that since the University isn’t going to respond to our demands on the basis of reason and human needs, the bargaining process can only work if teaching assistants are determined to

³⁷ “Letters to the Editor,” December 2, 1969, TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

secure those demands and overcome University resistance. The question which must be answered very soon is ‘what is the next step?’³⁸

Marketti wrote in a tone that reflected the frustration that bargaining team members felt as contract negotiations began to stall. But this tone also served a larger rhetorical purpose in transmuting their feelings of frustration into an ultimatum of sorts. Marketti and other TAA leaders recognized that the stubbornness of the university bargaining team served as a potential spark to a constituency constantly kept apprised of bad-faith administrative rhetoric and action through the Newsletter. Whereas progress had previously been measured through decisions made between bargaining teams, the claim that teaching assistants must be “determined to secure those demands and overcome University resistance” presented TAs with a new option out of the seeming stalemate: collective action. Rhetorically, this pivot worked to invoke a shared sense of responsibility on the part of teaching assistants to “secure” a favorable contract. Moreover, TAA organizers’ constant undermining of the higher ground publicly afforded to administrators allowed the union to assert an alternative perspective by which to view the university’s publicity: as fictitious, irresponsible, and incapable of representing the needs of graduate workers. In effect, TAA organizers produced compelling arguments against the legitimacy of the university’s public discourse and offered a persuasive alternative achievable through workers’ collective action.

A bargaining deadline of January 8, 1970 had been set, but the two sides were not any closer to agreement. The Bargaining Team Report occupied over half of the January 5 Newsletter, detailing, among other things, the university’s attempt to: “establish an anti-TAA united front among the faculty,” have department faculty endorse the university’s bargaining position without a presentation of the union position, disallow TAA representatives in

³⁸ “TAA Newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 6,” November 17, 1969, TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

departmental bargaining, and more.³⁹ Of the administration's reticence to involve undergraduate students in educational planning mechanisms, Jim Marketti recorded, "The basic University strategy of moving from a less than nothing position to a nothing position was played out again in its new educational planning proposal...the University's position is a phantom offer."⁴⁰ Here, Marketti attempted to decipher the underlying administrative intention often hidden behind ostensibly neutral contract language. Given that the TAA was operating on a terrain—the bargaining table—where the university and its resources held considerable advantage, the task of untangling the rhetorical sleights-of-hand of the university became a necessary (albeit time-consuming) task for union leaders. As the deadline for bargaining approached with no clear end in sight, TAA leaders sought to marshal feelings of distrust and anger at administrators and their tactics, which could then be translated into momentum toward collective action. Through the constant bargaining team updates, the TAA made visible administrative actions that occurred largely out-of-view of unengaged TAs. This allowed the TAA to delegitimize administrative credibility and undermine TA faith in how administrators governed the university.

By February, with the bargaining process halted, the rhetoric of the TAA reached a fever pitch. In a pamphlet titled "...Shut It Down?" TAA authors made their final case for a coordinated, open-ended strike by TAs. They cataloged the eight major contract issues that had deadlocked the negotiations: Educational planning, length of appointments, secret files, evaluations, grievance procedure, workloads, health plan, and restrictive language. In its ultimate paragraph, the authors offered their final (text-based) call-to-arms:

We are the first TA union with exclusive bargaining rights for all campus TAs. We are the only union to have exhaustively developed demands covering the nature of our work

³⁹ "TAA Newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 7," January 5, 1970, folder "1970 Newsletters," TAA Archive, TAA union office, Madison, WI.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and control over our work lives. That aspect of our unionism has sparked nationwide interest in our struggle. The University recognizes this fact and it may be the reason why their resistance has been so fierce. But no management has been able to stop a movement of workers really committed to change. We have been manipulated, lied to, scorned and ignored. We have talked, reasoned, debated, and waited. Now we will win.⁴¹

This rhetoric cohered all of the threads that the TAA had been communicating through its newsletters and other channels over the previous ten months: workplace decision-making, administrative intransigence, and collective action. It knitted them into a rhetoric that translated the disrespect and paternalism from the university into a shared mission, at the same time that it connected this paternalism to the union's commitment to redistributing workplace decision-making. This language also tapped into the working-class lineage that the union had long been circulating by deploying the rhetoric of class antagonisms—management versus workers. In this final rhetorical act before the TAA's strike, the union continued to establish itself as a legitimate, authoritative, alternative power base by which to challenge the university's mandate on making decisions that affected TAs and students.

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to demonstrate how worker-organizers constructed a working-class counterpublic through the circulation of texts that established the TAA as a legitimate counter-institution in the decision-making processes at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Worker-organizers communicated from a working-class standpoint in their early articulations of the structural location of the graduate TA in the education system and delegitimized the university's self-representation as a benevolent employer with the authority to determine the working conditions of its TAs and the learning conditions of its undergraduate students. In making this argument, I analyzed a period of time in which TAA worker-organizers

⁴¹ “Shut It Down?”

attempted to persuade graduate TAs not just of the importance of having a union to advocate on their behalf, but also of the necessity of fighting for contractually-enforced decision-making powers in university issues that involve TA labor. There is still much to explore with this case study, and given the time, I would have liked to explore the relationship between the TAA and faculty. While the TAA often directed its criticism toward the administration, it did not have a consistent relationship with faculty. This is likely due in some respects to the class vacillation of the intellectual class and of the TAA's uneasy relationship with its members' professorial aspirations.

What this chapter offered is a case study in which the fundamental issue of the redistribution of decision-making power was made explicit through the deployment of a working-class standpoint by TAA organizers. In some respects, this is a product of the historical moment in which it took place; as will be made clear in Chapter Four, the redistribution of decision-making power has today receded as an issue among labor unions and the Left. Had the university capitulated on this demand (as they did very briefly during the strike itself), the history of the UW-TAA relationship may have been written much differently. Even so, my hope with this chapter is that rhetoricians attend to the issue of decision-making power in counterpublic studies and studies of activist rhetorics: How do counterpublics address decision-making? How does the standpoint deployed allow rhetors or an audience to identify with the power to make decisions governing their workplaces and their lives?

In examining how TAA worker-organizers developed an analysis of graduate labor from a working-class standpoint, this chapter demonstrates how working-class counterpublics circulate counterdiscourses that resist dominant publics' depictions of reality by exposing how workers' experiences are blocked or prevented from public expression or representation. In so

doing, working-class counterpublics offer what Miriam Hansen, in her foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience*, calls a “horizon of a different kind, which in turn makes dominant publicity look incoherent and arbitrary.”⁴² The suppression of particular worker discourses or expressions of reality demonstrates how dominant publics’ claims to legitimacy and totality are reliant on partial and exclusionary perceptions. Moreover, in exposing these contradictions and connecting them to particular circumstances, working-class counterpublics like the TAA lay the groundwork for class consciousness-raising rooted in workers’ lived experiences. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the ongoing contestation of graduate workers’ claims to worker-ness makes clear that the struggle for consciousness is highly rhetorical.

This case study offers a compelling example of a working-class counterpublic, one whose rhetorical articulations are rooted in its capacity to articulate exploitation and domination from a working-class standpoint. For the contemporary TAA, it offers a glimpse of how the union once fought for decision-making power and suggests rhetorical tactics that might allow it to do so again in a post-COVID world. Given the consolidation of administrative decision-making powers under the rubric of public health and safety brought about by the pandemic, issues of who is making decisions, on whose behalf and in whose interests, remain more important than ever for workers not just at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, but everywhere.

⁴² Miriam Hansen, foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience*, by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 1972/1993/2016), xxxii).

Chapter Three

Constructing the Graduate Worker in the Neoliberal University

In April 2019, TAA co-presidents Chance McMahon and Sara Trongone sat down for a meeting with the Dean of the Graduate School, William Karpus, and the Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, Laurent Heller, to discuss mandatory student fees, graduate worker wages, and TAA inclusion in university decision-making. The four had met semi-regularly in closed-door meetings over the course of the school year about these and other issues. This meeting, however, was different. Twenty minutes in, fourteen graduate student workers entered the office without permission from Karpus, joining McMahon and Trongone and refusing to leave. In surprise, Karpus pushed one TAA member up against the wall of his office in an attempt to physically remove him from the space; the Dean then left and campus police arrived soon after.¹ The occupiers, drawn from both the union's elected leadership and its more active membership, intended to draw attention to administrators' refusal to move on the issue of mandatory fee relief for graduate workers. They occupied the office for four hours, at which point they were removed by campus police and cited for violations of the University of Wisconsin Administrative Code. Following the office occupation, the TAA's campaign for fee relief stalled, as administrators broke off communication with TAA leaders and the union was unable to translate the occupation into any larger action.

The office occupation was the culmination of two years of organizing around the issue of mandatory student fee relief for graduate workers that began in fall 2017. Internally, union

¹ TAA-Madison, "Graduate School Dean Walks Out from a Meeting and Calls Police on Graduate Workers," April 26, 2019, <https://taa-madison.org/graduate-school-dean-walks-out-from-a-meeting-and-calls-police-on-graduate-workers/>.

leaders had been gauging members' appetite for collective action up to and including a strike; three weeks prior, the TAA had held a rally of over 400 graduate student workers at the administrative building that served as a test of the union's capacity. Still, after informally surveying members following the rally, worker-organizers found that the majority of TAA members were reluctant to take part in any sort of work stoppage to compel administrators to take action on fee relief. With these findings, and as a last-ditch effort to maintain pressure on administrators, organizers turned to the idea of deploying a small, committed group of union activists for the office occupation.

The TAA's campaign against mandatory student fees from 2017 to 2019 was the newest iteration of a fifteen-year contest. In 2003, the union worked with other campus organizations and the Madison Common Council to have the International Student Fee permanently removed by the university; the Fee had been proposed by administrators to cover the costs of implementing federal software that surveilled international students post-9/11.² In 2010, the union's "No New Seg Fees" campaign successfully defeated a student referendum that would have increased student fees by 10% to fund a new recreation center. The TAA's main messaging, that students "can't afford a \$50 million gym when the UW is cutting back on education," named a dynamic replicated at colleges and universities across the country.³ As I detail below, in 2013 and 2014, thanks to the heightened labor consciousness that resulted from Republican governor Scott Walker's attacks on organized labor in 2011, the TAA led campaigns, like their 2013 "Pay Us Back" campaign, that responded to similar emergent fiscal conditions in the university. With

² Matthew Dolbey, "Chancellor Rules on SEVIS Fee," *The Badger Herald*, August 29, 2003, <https://badgerherald.com/news/2003/08/29/chancellor-rules-on/>.

³ No New Seg Fees!, "About," <https://www.facebook.com/No-New-Seg-Fees-351516666428/about/>.

each campaign, the union built coalitions on- and off-campus that connected the political dynamics between the state and the university to student fee increases as part of a larger ideological project transferring the cost of non-educational infrastructural projects onto students. At the same time, the cyclical nature of graduate studies meant that the TAA had to continually invest in members' political education, situating their financial hardships within the ongoing transformation of higher education.

The political rationality underwriting this transformation, what we know as the neoliberalization of higher education, exacerbated the challenges to organizing graduate workers at Wisconsin around a shared identity as workers in the 2010s.⁴ Neoliberalism describes a regime of free-market competition, financial deregulation, and cuts in social service spending that began in the 1970s. Neoliberalism has ushered in a suite of economic and ideological forces that Wendy Brown writes has “disseminate[d] the *model of the market* to all domains and activities...and configure[d] human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.”⁵ Neoliberal policies have not only facilitated the transfer of public higher education funding from state and federal revenues to students (and, as I demonstrate in this chapter, graduate student workers), but also been buttressed by conservatizing discourses of individualism and personal responsibility to, as Robert Asen argues,

⁴ See Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, eds., *Composition in the Age of Austerity* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Henry A Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Randy Martin, ed., *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁵ Brown, *Undoing*, 31.

weaken social relations and devalue collective action.⁶ In so doing, such discourses obscure awareness and analysis of the causal relationship between neoliberal policy and ideology and the ongoing transformation of graduate labor conditions. As universities have adopted managerial practices perfected in the corporate sector in order to sell not just an “education” but a student “experience,” they have embraced a marketized understanding of their own missions that treats as hostile any challenges to its managerial authority. Under this fiscal rubric, the TAA’s efforts to influence decision-making priorities with campaigns around student fees threatened the smooth flow of capital and the balance of decision-making powers in the university. This project is animated by changes in how the TAA responded rhetorically to the neoliberalization of the University of Wisconsin in its efforts to cohere a durable working-class counterpublic.

My interest in this chapter lies in analyzing how the union articulated to members the structural relationship of graduate labor to the neoliberal transformation of the University of Wisconsin during its two-year campaign against mandatory student fees. Put another way, I am motivated by the following question: how did the rhetorical choices made by worker-organizers during the TAA’s campaign around mandatory student fees shape what we might call graduate workers’ collective “labor identity,” their self-perception of their material interests as graduate workers relative to those of UW administrators and the modern neoliberal university? This chapter moves beyond analyzing only the printed matter invoking graduate student worker’s labor consciousness, as explored in Chapter Two, to account as well for the material influences—bodies in space, social media, affects, discourses, and texts in circulation—that informed their campaign, as this move allows me to better capture its micrological texture.

⁶ Robert Asen, “Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (October 2017), 331.

Looking at these artifacts suggests that TAA leaders made rhetorical choices in their framing throughout the campaign that had downstream implications for their struggle to cultivate a working-class counterpublic appropriate for the political moment they were in.

I argue in this chapter that the TAA produced a rhetoric of graduate worker subjectivity that constrained the union's ability to parlay graduate workers' individual sense of injustice over mandatory student fees into a politicized consciousness of the role the fees play in the ongoing transformation of the university system under neoliberal political rationality. While not singularly responsible for the campaign's defeat, the failure to situate graduate labor within the material alterations transforming the university, I argue, represents one piece of the union's struggle to escalate its two-year campaign toward a strike. I contend that the campaign's struggle to contest the circulating rhetorics of graduate labor that largely *erased* class consciousness of graduate labor dampened organizers' capacity to galvanize broader participation in disruptive workplace action and counteract an administrative rhetoric that was reinforced by ambient neoliberal rationality. On a personal note, as a prominent organizer for much of the second half of the TAA's campaign around student fee relief, I write this chapter in hindsight in an attempt to better reckon with my own feelings of failure, stemming from a gut sense at the time and since that our organizing was missing something irreplaceable—a widely-felt, politicized, anti-neoliberal labor consciousness among graduate workers—that kept a successful work stoppage out of reach.

In this chapter, I put the TAA's campaign in conversation with critical labor studies, critical university studies, and labor-focused rhetorical scholarship. While a number of rhetorical scholars including Catherine Chaput, Christopher Carter, and Nancy Welch have examined the ongoing circulation and impact of neoliberal rhetorics in the university and in academic labor

systems, there is yet to be a sustained exploration of the rhetoric of graduate worker subjectivity in the neoliberal university. It is more common to see the presence of graduate labor in writing studies, particularly the scholarship of Marc Bousquet and an upcoming edited collection by Tessa Brown in which this chapter appears in an earlier form, due to that field's proximity to classroom labor recognized as such by the university. And yet, following from the previous chapter, studying how (or whether) graduate workers and unions integrate broader analyses of neoliberal political economic conditions into the rhetorical construction of graduate labor allows us to interrogate how and why the rhetoric of graduate labor remains so contested fifty years after the TAA's successful campaign for recognition. This chapter analyzes the competing discourses of graduate labor under neoliberalism marshalled by the university and the TAA to argue that the label of "graduate worker" presents discursive and material opportunities—otherwise unavailable to faculty or undergraduate students—to probe at and disrupt the rhetorical boundaries of the contemporary university set by administrators and neoliberal capital.

In the following section, I detail the conditions that the TAA faced in the 2010s following the 2011 passage of Wisconsin's Act 10, which largely outlawed public-sector bargaining and decertified longstanding unions like the TAA, and which presaged more brazen attacks on organized labor nationwide. I also describe elements of the TAA's subsequent campaigns for fee relief and against cuts to the university system that actively integrated political and structural analyses of neoliberal trends at Wisconsin into its campaign publicity, both successfully and not. In doing this, TAA organizers drew on their perspective as graduate workers to expose the hypocrisy of administrative decision-makers.

Workers Without Rights: The TAA after Act 10

The year 2011 ushered in long-lasting changes to the TAA's relationship to the university, changes that faded into the background among Wisconsin graduate students in 2017 who had not been present to witness the grassroots struggle six years prior. In 2011, then-Governor Scott Walker responded to a projected state budget deficit of \$3.6 billion with a bill that targeted public-sector worker rights.⁷ The bill, more than simple number crunching, sought to severely curtail the ability of all public sector unions to collectively bargain and collect member dues. In a message from Walker to UW Employees, the governor laid out the changes to collective bargaining, including limiting eligible bargaining topics to only wage increases, which would be capped at the rate of inflation. Further, contracts would be limited to one year instead of the standard contract length of two years, and collective bargaining units would have to take annual votes to maintain certification as a legally recognized union in which 51% of the entire unit voted "yes" (previous recertification regulations required 50% plus one of those voting to vote "yes"). Conservative think tanks and donors had long viewed labor unions and collective bargaining rights as targets for dismantling, and the budget deficit gave Walker political cover to carry out this task. These attacks were central to finally breaking the stronghold of Wisconsin organized labor's resistance—with a proud, oft-invoked history in the state dating back to the 1840s—to political and economic policies that aimed to enrich corporate stakeholders by cutting worker protections, disabling solidarity across worksites, and shifting decision-making power away from workers. Despite an occupation of the State Capitol building (spearheaded by the TAA) that lasted 16 days and brought hundreds of thousands of people to the city in what

⁷ Scott Walker, "Budget Repair Bill Message from Governor Walker to UW Employees," UW News, February 11, 2011, <https://news.wisc.edu/budget-repair-bill-message-from-governor-walker-to-uw-employees/>.

became known as the “Wisconsin Uprising,” the coalition could not outlast Republican obstinance. Further, leaders of statewide labor unions did not call for a statewide strike, which was circulated as a serious possibility by grassroots activists, but instead put all of their effort behind a recall effort that ultimately failed in removing Walker from office. One month after the Uprising began, the Wisconsin Assembly passed an amended version of the bill that maintained its recently-imposed strict limitations on collective bargaining.

At a TAA Executive Board meeting in the summer of 2011, union leaders debated how to move forward in the months after Act 10. At the meeting, some leaders expressed a desire to recertify as a union, even with the bargaining restrictions, since failure to do so would “reduce [their] ability to effectively advocate for members in the workplace” and “departments [would] be more free to ignore [them].”⁸ Others worried that recertifying would signal “participat[ion] in an illegitimate process.”⁹ Ultimately, the TAA chose to forego certification, and with it their status as the legally recognized bargaining agent for graduate workers at UW–Madison. In the eyes of state labor law, graduate workers were unrepresented, by the TAA or by any labor union. UW administrators were no longer statutorily bound to bargain contracts with graduate worker representatives every two years. And administrators at Wisconsin lamented the new balance of power; William Tracy, interim dean and director of the College of Agricultural and Life Science, opined that, “The loss of the TAA's ability to bargain for these kinds of improvements to graduate employment threatens the ability of UW-Madison to compete for the best and brightest graduate students, which ultimately will damage our ability to compete for the best and brightest

⁸ TAA Executive Board, Meeting Minutes, July 19, 2011.

⁹ Ibid.

faculty.”¹⁰ Though Act 10 significantly altered the balance of decision-making powers at the university, the TAA saw renewed participation in the union, and many campus stakeholders, including faculty and shared governance bodies, were eager to collaborate.¹¹

In the years following Act 10, the union reminded graduate workers of its relevance to their lives by campaigning on bread-and-butter economic issues, building support by contextualizing graduate workers’ financial circumstances within the neoliberal trends intensifying at the university. In 2013, the TAA launched its “Pay Us Back” campaign, which called out “the ever-climbing seg fees, our growing health care contributions, and our stagnant wages” as key features of graduate worker life at Wisconsin.¹² The union insisted on regular meetings with administrators about their demands, pursuing informal bargaining even though state labor law prohibited collective bargaining. Within months of the start of the campaign, administrators announced a 4.67 percent raise for graduate student workers after initially offering under two percent.¹³ In 2014, the TAA led a campaign that challenged another increase in student fees to overhaul recreational facilities. In its letter to Chancellor Rebecca Blank, the TAA Executive Board identified increased student fees as part of a broader trend in higher education transferring the rising cost of non-educational infrastructural projects onto students. They wrote,

[T]he current practice of continually increasing the private burden on students for the ability to access a public university is unsustainable and antithetical to the principles of public higher education. Whether the referendum passes or not, there is money in the

¹⁰ Jay Rath, “UW-Madison TAs Return to Class More Financially Stressed,” *Isthmus*, September 1, 2011, <https://isthmus.com/news/news/uw-madison-tas-return-to-class-more-financially-stressed/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² TAA-Madison, “Pay Us Back! – TAA – Graduate Worker Union of UW-Madison,” February 21, 2013, <https://taa-madison.org/pay-us-back/>.

¹³ Michael Billeaux, Katie Zaman, and Ty Carroll, “Why We’re ‘Grading In,’” *Socialist Worker* April 28, 2014, <http://socialistworker.org/2014/04/28/why-were-grading-in>.

university to improve our Rec Sports facilities without pricing out more students or driving them further into debt.¹⁴

Even though the fee increase was approved by student referendum, the union's efforts laid out an analytical frame through which graduate workers and allies could contest administrative discursive strategies.

Further, in local media and national publications in the mid-2010s, TAA members were quick to draw larger connections between its campaign demands and political events in the state and at the university. In 2015, the TAA mobilized alongside community organizations in opposition to Walker's proposed \$300 million cut in funding for the statewide UW system. Writing for *Jacobin*, a national left-wing publication, TAA co-presidents Michael Billeaux and Eleni Schirmer invoked Walker's 2011 legislation in the first sentences of their essay and continued throughout to frame the proposed spending cut through that lens.¹⁵ Responding to the same proposed budget cuts in a blog post for *Reclaim UC*, TAA organizers Lenora Hanson and Elsa Noterman identified the hypocrisy of administrators' public rebukes of the Walker administration, citing the decision-makers' eagerness to trade the budget cuts for "public authority" over the UW system, under which the Board of Regents would be able to govern a public institution with a history of significant power-sharing with vastly reduced state and public oversight. Hanson and Noterman noted that administrators' outcry at the Walker administration's proposed budget cuts "obscures the administration's ongoing efforts to consolidate control over

¹⁴ TAA-Madison, "A Response to Chancellor Blank from the TAA," March 3, 2014, <https://taa-madison.org/a-response-to-chancellor-blank-from-the-taa/>.

¹⁵ Michael Billeaux and Eleni Schirmer, "What's Next After 'Right to Work'?", March 5, 2015, <https://jacobinmag.com/2015/03/scott-walker-right-to-work/>.

the university.”¹⁶ In the years immediately following Act 10, the TAA built on its members’ strong understanding of the political, economic, and ideological valences of life at the university—no doubt elevated as a result of Act 10 activism—in order to contextualize the changes taking place at Wisconsin. Moreover, the union identified legislators and administrators as having convergent class interests that did not align with those of graduate workers, the student body, or the broader public.

But by the late 2010s, the landscape for labor organizing looked much different in Wisconsin and around the country. Labor consciousness in Wisconsin and at the university—alongside union membership—declined as the memory of Act 10 and the throngs of people at the Capitol faded from public consciousness.¹⁷ And as the natural cycle of university life meant that fewer graduate students from that era persisted at the university, the relevance of Act 10 on contemporary graduate student life could not be taken for granted by the union. Even so, TAA organizers still sought to muster the same level of indignation over the bold actions taken by Wisconsin state legislators in 2011. In spring 2017, the union sent an email to its members with the ominous heading: “Our Employment Contract is at Risk.” Inside, authors laid out for the first time to members how administrators planned to establish a committee without TAA input that would replace the union’s 2009 contract with a policy handbook:

After waiting several months, we were recently given a draft of a document that explains the format of the committee. No seat or role was given to the TAA. **Citing Act 10, University administrators have said that the TAA cannot elect or appoint representatives to this committee, and has reserved all the graduate assistant seats**

¹⁶ Lenora Hanson and Elsa Noterman, “Reclaim UC: What University Administrators Gain from \$300 Million in Cuts,” *Reclaim UC* (blog), February 9, 2015, <https://reclaimuc.blogspot.com/2015/02/what-university-administrators-gain.html>.

¹⁷ Briana Reilly, “A Decade Later, Act 10 Has Reshaped the Labor Movement in Wisconsin,” *The Capital Times*, February 23, 2021, https://madison.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/a-decade-later-act-10-has-reshaped-the-labor-movement-in-wisconsin/article_12d65a94-7796-568f-a1fd-7adc5c6cdf9f.html.

to be assigned by ASM, a body of mostly undergraduates that does not handle work-related graduate issues. According to our lawyers, Act 10 does not actually prohibit us from sitting on this committee. (bold in original)

The email did not elaborate on Act 10, nor on its relevance to graduate worker concerns in 2017; the authors may have presumed that email recipients understood or remembered its significance. Yet by invoking Act 10 to condemn the actions of University administrators, the authors situate the problem surrounding decision-making in a piece of legislation six years in the past. They assign righteous feelings of indignation over graduate workers' powerlessness in decision-making to a legislative battle that arguably had little suasive power for graduate students in 2017, many of whom were not at the university, nor in the state, in 2011. While the constraints imposed by Act 10 had not changed, consciousness of its enduring impact on the labor conditions of graduate workers had, and TAA organizers do not appear to have recognized this.

Administrators, too, had cycled in and out of the university, meaning that previous longstanding relationships and institutional memory between the UW administration and the TAA no longer carried the same importance that they once did. The regular contract negotiations that had largely been taken for granted prior to 2011, negotiations in which the union was assured an audience with administrators over key decisions affecting graduate labor, were no longer part of the process by which graduate workers could secure meaningful concessions over working conditions from administrators. Along with these changes came a shift in the rhetorical valuation of graduate labor, as UW administrators put distance between graduate assistants and language classifying them as "workers." For instance, in 2017, in the leadup to the aforementioned contract-to-handbook transition, administrators said that any language referencing the union or "union rights" would not be included.¹⁸ Legal and legislative

¹⁸ Meeting notes between TAA and UW Office of Human Resources, July 15, 2016.

arrangements now excluded the TAA from “official” decision-making arenas. As a result, the union found itself without its previously reliable avenues through which to bolster member engagement and develop members’ labor consciousness. University discourses, aided by state labor law, threatened to neutralize the language of labor and de-legitimize the TAA as an agential force in university decision-making.

In this section, I have demonstrated how, in the immediate aftermath of Act 10, the TAA relied on a labor consciousness of its membership, elevated through direct confrontation with state lawmakers in 2011, to connect its members’ experiences as graduate workers to larger political and economic changes happening at the university and state levels. I have also demonstrated how the TAA’s analysis in 2017 did not change, to its detriment, even as Act 10 receded in public memory and changes to the structural dynamics at the university necessitated new forms of member engagement. I build from this background in the next section by engaging with thinking in rhetorical studies and critical university studies about the discursive bounds of the contemporary university. Doing so allows me to build my argument that demonstrates how the language of work affords opportunities for graduate workers to contest the rhetorical valuation of graduate labor under neoliberalism. I then read the TAA’s publicity and public actions around fees to show how the TAA’s tactics in its fee campaign constrained its capacity to rhetorically construct a labor identity among its members and translate the individual burden of fees to a broader collective concern.

Rhetorics of Graduate Labor and the Neoliberal University

The rhetorics of graduate labor in the landscape of neoliberal higher education is rife with contradiction. Like faculty members, graduate students conduct research, teach, and perform administrative duties. And yet, in discourses circulated by official university communications

and the administrative body, the labor of graduate students is rhetorically set apart, as an “apprenticeship” or a “reward,” from those workers who are otherwise recognized in the university’s labor system. For example, in response to graduate workers voting to unionize at Columbia University in 2018, Provost John Coatsworth—who organized with the TAA in the late 1960s and early 1970s—declared that “the relationship of graduate students to the faculty that instruct them must not be reduced to ordinary terms of employment.”¹⁹ The ambiguity of graduate worker subjectivity—are they workers? students? apprentices?—complicates the discursive arguments made by graduate labor unions and organizers. Without circulating counterdiscourses, dominant rhetorics surrounding graduate labor can interpellate graduate students into an understanding of their labor in ways that hinder class consciousness-raising efforts. Moreover, these rhetorics can persuade graduate students to feel invested in the university’s “brand” and its institutional mission in ways that do not threaten its academic labor system or its distribution of decision-making controls.

The academic labor system has evolved significantly from 1970, when the TAA first went on strike for educational planning. For one, the world has become inextricably interconnected through processes of globalization in the late 20th century. Critical university studies scholars like Piya Chatterjee, Sunaina Maira, and Roderick Ferguson track how the processes facilitating the global entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism—unregulated trade, flexible labor, increased surveillance powers, and just-in-time production—have both migrated to and been exported by the American public research university as it sustains intimate partnerships with and adopts the managerial practices of the corporate sphere. Chatterjee and

¹⁹ Jenny Zhu, “Columbia Declines To Bargain With Graduate Student Union,” *Bwog*, January 30, 2018, <https://bwog.com/2018/01/columbia-declines-to-bargain-with-graduate-student-union/>.

Maira trace the interconnections between higher education and global structures of nationalism, militarism, and neoliberalism as universities turn more toward police and surveillance tactics to manage their populations.²⁰ Whereas their collection speaks to the university system's role in facilitating global oppression, Ferguson argues that the American university system learned how to stymie dissent by coopting the radical demands of minority students, incorporating minority difference into university governance and growing the university's managerial capacities.²¹ In turn, global corporate enterprises, Ferguson argues, learned from the university's handling of Black student protests in the 1960s to introduce new forms of commodifying and marketing to minority difference. The configurations of power relations that arose from this turn in universities' handling of dissent paired the growth of an administrative class tasked with managing the university's labor force with lean production practices perfected by global corporations. The processes by which universities have adapted to and supported the development of global capital flows are obscured by what Catherine Chaput terms a nostalgic rhetoric of democracy and global cooperation, which masks how modern American research universities serve and are served by capitalism's drive for profit.²² Among other consequences, processes of globalization have exacerbated not just the precarity of international students, who are both heavily recruited and placed under increasing webs of surveillance and federal restriction, but also the precarity of all contingent workers, who are now subject to corporate

²⁰ Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²¹ Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

²² Catherine Chaput, *Inside the Teaching Machine: Rhetoric and the Globalization of the U.S. Public Research University* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama Press, 2008), 30.

managerial logics of flexible labor. Globalization has fundamentally remade the way that the university thinks about and organizes its labor force.

With the neoliberal reorganization of higher education has come an increased solidarity among top-level university administrators—acting in lockstep with the strictures imposed by credit-rating agencies that determine schools’ creditworthiness—to position itself as the singular vanguard and steward of the system’s transformation.²³ Whereas faculty and student bodies once benefitted from decision-making power-sharing, administrations have succeeded in both reforming the logics that now drive university decision-making and making those logics appear self-evident.²⁴ Marc Bousquet contends that “higher education administration pervasively and self-consciously seeks control of the institution by seeking to retool the values, practices, and sense of institutional reality that comprise faculty and student culture.”²⁵ More than just usurping faculty and student bodies in power-sharing arrangements, administrators have benefited from the interpellation of faculty and students into the neoliberal rationality governing higher education decision-making, something I explore further in Chapter Four. This is often seen in light of the academy’s drive toward professionalization, which Chaput argues has often “located, isolated, and neutralized” potentially oppositional political possibilities in ways that “perpetually

²³ Eleni Schirmer, a PhD holder from UW–Madison, wrote in *The Nation*, “More than a financial arrangement, debt financing creates a power relationship. The rules of credit govern campuses with more force than virtually any other institutional body...As universities must increasingly borrow money to operate, their credit ratings have become their lifelines. Given such influence, the rating agencies not only evaluate institutions; they also incentivize their behavior.” Eleni Schirmer, “It’s Not Just Students Drowning in Debt. Colleges Are Too!,” *The Nation*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/student-debt-university-credit/>. See also: Charles Stephens Easton, “Financialization and the New Organizational Inequality in U.S. Higher Education,” PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2016).

²⁴ In referring to administrators here, I am not commenting on the motivations of individual administrators, but rather the motivations of administrators acting as a bounded class. This could be read another way as the administrative “subject.”

²⁵ Bousquet, *How*, 12.

reconstitute” and sustain the university’s functioning.²⁶ The rhetorics of professionalization circulating in the modern American research university contribute to the tension among graduate student identification between administrative or disciplinary modes of engagement in the university and labor consciousness. Or, to put it plainly, professionalization in academia encourages graduate students to identify not with their fellow campus workers, but with the university’s needs. Indeed, administrators’ near-hegemony over institutional decision-making and rationality suppresses, erases, and de-mobilizes knowledges like labor consciousness that can be used to promote oppositional or antagonistic relations in the university.

What Chaput, Bousquet, and other scholars of higher education have identified is how the rhetorical construction of the modern American research university inscribes boundaries around what is appropriate or possible in the university. Further, the processes that construct, sustain, and reify the rhetorical boundaries of the university system have been overwhelmed by neoliberal rationality, saturating the ideologies and logics that now guide institutional decision-making. Nearly every aspect of the university has been subject to market logics; rhetorics of austerity, “crisis,” and “belt-tightening” in tough economic times often justify cuts to non-revenue-generating programs and student support services.²⁷ The rhetoric of personal responsibility, moreover, naturalizes the transfer of financial responsibility for education from state funding to individual payment for a public university. In the case of student fees, whose opaque naming conventions obscure their actual import to the university’s funding model as a revenue stream for infrastructural projects like state-of-the-art recreation centers, students have internalized the notion that they control the fees through student government structures, in some

²⁶ Chaput, *Inside*, 10.

²⁷ Welch and Scott, *Composition*, 8-9.

instances calling the fees “by students, for students.”²⁸ This language normalizes the unequal distribution of university decision-making controls; at Wisconsin, funds allocated by students represent just 3 percent of the collected fees, while the remaining 97 percent of the fees are spent at the discretion of the Chancellor of the university, after “consultation with students” as mandated by UW Regent Policy.²⁹ The tiny fraction of expenditures over which UW students actually have meaningful control underscores that participation in decision-making has been reduced largely to symbolic inclusion and has been divorced from actual control over institutional process and procedure.³⁰ Further, at UW and elsewhere, institutional governing boards can increase fees unilaterally, shortcutting would-be shared governance systems. Yet, even as the issue of student fees is inherently political in nature, part and parcel of the neoliberal deformation of higher education, it has been reduced discursively to a personal matter. With this in mind, the rhetorical processes undergirding mandatory student fees in the contemporary university system, and the graduate labor force’s relationship to them, affords a rich terrain in which to examine how the TAA engaged materially and discursively with the issue.

Naturalized, too, is the exploitative power dynamic between graduate workers, who are often figured as apprentices learning a craft, and their managers. These boundaries inform what Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich term the academy’s “regime of civility,” by which they mean an ambient presumption of reasoned and respectful dialogue, that sustains its power

²⁸ Yogev Ben-Yitschak, “Students Must Maintain Involvement in Fight to Protect Segregated Fees,” *The Badger Herald*, September 13, 2017, <https://badgerherald.com/opinion/2017/09/13/students-must-maintain-involvement-in-fight-to-protect-segregated-fees/>.

²⁹ “UW System Administrative Policy 820, ‘Segregated University Fees’” (2020), <https://www.wisconsin.edu/uw-policies/uw-system-administrative-policies/segregated-university-fees/>.

³⁰ Brown, *Undoing*, 128.

relations and imposes constraints on those seeking deeper structural change.³¹ In their account of a successful eighteen-day sit-in at Syracuse University, Rodríguez and Kuebrich document how administrative rhetoric stressed civility and listening sessions in order to pressure students to “express themselves into passivity without any access to real decision-making power”; in opposition, organizers made visible the tactics of administrators in an effort to inoculate students against them.³² Naming the tactics that universities use to order and discipline bodies in space educated protestors on what Jodi Melamed calls the “traps and strategies of repression-as-usual.”³³ Doing so allows campus organizers to poke at and expose the artifice of rhetorical boundaries that may have once appeared as inflexible.

Different from the political economic conditions in 1970, the rhetorical circulation of neoliberal values has profoundly altered the terrain of labor organizing in higher education. For one, these values have compromised the capacity of today’s graduate workers to gain awareness of the totality of the labor system of American higher education and their structural location and function within it. As described in the previous chapter, consciousness is not something pre-given or individually constituted, but as Stuart Hall contends, “a collective phenomenon, a consequence of the relationship between ‘the self’ and the ideological discourses which compose the cultural terrain of a society.” The material conditions of the neoliberal university that structure and sustain these discourses obscure the role of graduate workers in its functioning. As Bousquet identifies in his theory of graduate degree holders as the “waste product” (that is, the

³¹ Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich, “The Tone It Takes: An Eighteen-Day Sit-In at Syracuse University,” in *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*, ed. Jonathan Alexander and Susan C. Jarratt (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 168.

³² *Ibid.*, 169.

³³ Jodi Melamed, “Being Together Subversively, Outside in the University of Hegemonic Affirmation and Repressive Violence, as Things Heat Up (Again),” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2016), 990.

byproduct) of higher education, there remains a significant difference between graduate workers' lived experience of casualization and exploitation as a "'local disorder' (that authority will soon rectify)" and their capacity to grasp their collective potential for transforming the academic labor system.³⁴ Similarly, Tony Scott and Nancy Welch write that, in the field of Composition, which relies predominantly on a contingent labor force, the neoliberal reordering of higher education and naturalization of tiered academic labor systems has contributed to the lack of "a developed understanding of how labor conditions shape pedagogy, scholarship, and the production of literacy and students' writing."³⁵ Without labor consciousness, which can be facilitated through working-class rhetorical activity as detailed in Chapter Two, the political and ideological valences of graduate labor can be limited to individual expressions of injustice. While valid, such expressions contribute to feelings of powerlessness that can demobilize graduate workers in the face of hegemonic institutional forces.

Moreover, the rhetorical circulation of neoliberal values incentivizes the employment of increasingly tortuous rhetorics to describe graduate students and the work they do. These rhetorics obscure material realities, as evidenced in the above quote from Columbia Provost Coatsworth. In her analysis of the 1995 Yale grade strike, Kathy Newman describes how the Yale union, GESO, was forced to counter the mainstream and inter-university representations of graduate students as "privileged, histrionic, and demanding."³⁶ Newman identifies how depictions of graduate students in popular culture rarely depict them as part of a collectivity; more often than not, they are portrayed as lonely (*Marathon Man*), monstrous (*Candyman*), and

³⁴ Bousquet, *How*, 27.

³⁵ Welch and Scott, *Composition*, 6.

³⁶ Kathy M. Newman, "Poor, Hungry, and Desperate? Or Privileged, Histrionic, and Demanding? In Search of the True Meaning of 'Ph. D.,'" *Social Text*, no. 49 (1996), 97.

oversexed (*Beverly Hills 90210*).³⁷ Though these depictions have matured over the last quarter-century, internalized beliefs about the romantic nature of academic life persist to blunt greater labor consciousness. In his rhetorical analysis of the same grade strike, Thomas Discenna argues that the premier obstacle to organizing graduate student workers was the inherited wisdom that unionization was incompatible with the nature of the academy and its supposed “life of the mind.”³⁸ Graduate workers and worker-organizers are confronted with characterizations of academic life and graduate labor that circulate in the university itself and in the broader culture; these characterizations are then internalized or overlaid onto their lived experiences. Such rhetorics are exacerbated by the extensive media and public relations apparatuses often wielded by American research universities.

As rhetorician Allison Laubach Wright argues, institutional narratives of graduate education frequently reify rhetorical boundaries that erase the labor of graduate students. Graduate students are deemed students first, or apprentices learning a craft and benefitting from teaching fellowships from a beneficent university. Yet the market-based language that universities use to market themselves as attractive consumer experiences to undergraduate students obscure their reliance on graduate and contingent labor for instruction. Wright argues that rhetorics of “excellence” deployed by Tier One research universities rely on seeming value-neutrality (operating “without a direct referent”) to attract a greater share of student tuition and faculty research dollars while both relying on and erasing graduate student instructional labor.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid, 98.

³⁸ Thomas A. Discenna, “The Rhetoric of Graduate Employee Unionization: Critical Rhetoric and the Yale Grade Strike,” *Communication Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (February 26, 2010), 23.

³⁹ Allison Laubach Wright, “The Rhetoric of Excellence and the Erasure of Graduate Labor,” in *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*, ed. Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck (The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado, 2017), 272.

The material reality of graduate workers, Wright contends, “is hidden under the branding of the ‘Tier One University’ and the narrative of apprenticeship.”⁴⁰ This same register that Wright describes from the University of Houston is present in administrative language at Wisconsin, where administrators write that “Services and programs supported by segregated fees help make a UW–Madison education and experience highly attractive and enhance opportunities for success for all students.”⁴¹ The coded language, seemingly ideologically neutral, in effect masks the governing rationality behind the downward pressure applied to graduate student labor to support institutional spending. When this rhetoric becomes ubiquitous, as Wright, Wendy Brown, and others demonstrate it has, it circulates without apparent objection as it achieves what Goodwin et al. describe as the “coveted status of common sense” that requires “no author or credible source to certify [its] truth-value.”⁴² This rhetoric and the logics underwriting it pose significant barriers to organizing anti-neoliberal working-class counterpublics in the modern American university system.

I recount these logics not to dogpile on the university, but rather to name and document the circulation of multiple valuations of graduate student identity in the contemporary university that make developing labor consciousness particularly difficult. Without disrupting these valuations or providing compelling alternatives, graduate labor organizers sacrifice their ability to paint a portrait of the university that might allow working-class counterpublics to withstand misinformation, stalling tactics, and anti-labor action that university administrators have

⁴⁰ Ibid, 276.

⁴¹ Laurent Heller and William Karpus, “Letter to TAA Co-Presidents,” April 18, 2019.

⁴² Phillip Goodwin, Katrina Miller, and Catherine Chaput, “Accountable to Whom? The Rhetorical Circulation of Neoliberal Discourse and Its Ambient Effects on Higher Education,” in *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, ed. Kim Hong Nguyen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 16.

demonstrated willingness to take. One way consciousness is heightened, Cloud argues, is by articulating the contradictions between experience and ideology and using a shared class relationship as the grounds to bring people together across differences “as the basis of political, not just economic, action.”⁴³ As the previous chapter makes clear, a working-class standpoint affords the academy’s graduate workforce a perspective to translate the university’s ideology of individualism into collective action.

Labor-minded rhetoric scholars assert that working-class politics offer one means to contest the profound institutional pressures toward individualism, professionalization, and market rationality. Against the conservatizing pressures of professionalism, Chaput places her hope in a theory of “working-class professionalism” which offers a vantage point from which academics can smuggle into the university a working-class politic.⁴⁴ Recognizing how academics are “rhetorically encouraged” to identify with administrations, Chaput suggests that working-class professionalism makes oppositional political possibilities available to academic workers who recognize their labor within the class structure of the university.⁴⁵ Combining a rhetorical sensibility with Bousquet’s work and a graduate focus with Chaput’s, my argument extends their work by positing that the language of graduate labor opens alternative possibilities for processes of graduate worker identification that are otherwise unavailable to faculty. As I have demonstrated in this section, identifying with the label of “graduate worker” provides avenues for graduate worker-organizers to destabilize the rhetorical boundaries of the neoliberal university in ways that can build labor consciousness among graduate workers.

⁴³ Dana L. Cloud, “The Matrix and Critical Theory’s Desertion of the Real,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 4 (December 2006), 338.

⁴⁴ Chaput, *Inside*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

The TAA faced rhetorical obstacles, distinct from its contract campaign detailed in Chapter Two, that transformed its capacity to cohere a working-class counterpublic capable of securing concessions from Wisconsin administrators. In the following section, I analyze moments of the TAA's campaign from 2017 to 2019 in which the union both notched victories for graduate workers and suffered defeats. I trace the ways that TAA worker-organizers structured the participation of rank-and-file graduate workers over the two years. I also identify ways in which their discursive and embodied construction of graduate workers in protest actions and publicity constrained the development of a deeper labor consciousness that might have prepared greater numbers of graduate workers to identify with the label of "worker" and take disruptive workplace action.

The TAA and Student Fees, 2017-2019

The issue of student fees resurfaced for the union in the summer of 2017 when, without involving the TAA or other graduate student organizations, the UW–Madison administration announced it would be moving the payment deadline of student fees for all graduate students from the third month of each semester to the week before the semester began. This meant that graduate student workers on a nine-month, academic year contract would be required to pay their student fees, at the time \$641 each semester, before receiving their first paycheck following winter and summer breaks. In Chapter Four, I analyze the implications of the union's turn toward shared governance bodies as a way to build faculty support for their campaign and undercut the consolidation of administrative decision-making powers. In the study below, however, I look at how the TAA invited participation in their campaign from rank-and-file graduate workers. I begin first with a rally held at the UW administrative building that capped off nine months of organizing against the proposed payment deadline, identifying how the union relied on affective

appeals to graduate students' sense of personal injury. Next, after the success of the deadline campaign, I analyze how the union pivoted to an explicit recognition of student fees as a labor issue, employing the slogan "fees are wage theft" as its central message and hosting a "sit-in" at the administrative building to demand full financial relief from student fees for graduate workers. I argue that, while this action centered on graduate workers' value to the university system as workers, naming a frequently unnamed relationship between employee and employer, the union largely avoided confronting decision-makers directly. Finally, I briefly turn to the union's office occupation three weeks after the sit-in, which, I argue, represented union leaders' exasperation to build support in light of their failure to mobilize larger numbers of graduate workers. These analyses demonstrate how the multivalent rhetoric of graduate labor is marshaled divergently by institutional actors—in this case, Wisconsin administrators and the TAA—to contend for graduate assistants' attention and affiliation.

TAA Campaign, Stage One: Disrespected Graduate Students and Fee Payment Deadlines

Following the announcement from UW administrators, TAA worker-organizers gathered testimonials from graduate students about the effect of mandatory student fees on their economic well-being; the union also circulated a petition demanding that the administration reverse its decision. The stories collected were made public at a March 2018 rally held in the UW administration building attended by around 150 TAA members, non-member graduate workers, and allies. Attendees covered the central rotunda of the building in colored paper on which were written the stories of graduate workers struggling to get by. From there, the demonstrators marched to the office of the Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, where lead organizers delivered the petition signed by more than one thousand supporters. The group then marched across campus to the building that housed the Bursar's Office, where union members

shared personal testimonies about the already-harmful impact of student fees and the added injustice of the new payment deadline. The day of action culminated in a closed-door meeting between upper-level administrators and selected graduate workers who “share[d] their stories and call to action.”⁴⁶ Following these actions, and after nine months of organizing, administrators announced in an email to all graduate students that they would reverse their decision and honor the original fee payment deadline.

In their rhetoric, TAA worker-organizers emphasized personal testimony, implicitly relying on frames of individual economic hardship to elicit compassion and sympathy from university decision-makers. One testimony declared, “I am the lone provider of my younger sister after the passing of my father. I provide living, food, personal items and other things for her and myself. To pay such a large lump sum at once would make it nearly impossible to pay for rent and food for that month.”⁴⁷ Drawing upon personal financial circumstances, this testimony portrays segregated fees as a semi-private injustice visited upon the individual and her family. Further, it implicitly seeks to shame its intended audience of university decision-makers by demonstrating how their decision exacerbates her already challenging circumstances. The framing of segregated fees as a moral injustice is likewise evident in the following testimony: “Rent rises every year! I pay \$650/month for a 126 sq. ft. apartment shared with a roommate! SEG FEES ARE UNFAIR!”⁴⁸ The speaker here expresses both indignance and an underlying sense of the administration’s abdication of responsibility for the wellbeing of its employees. By

⁴⁶ Grace Wallner and Sonya Chechik. “Graduate students fill Bascom Hall, demand flexible seg-fee payment plan,” *Daily Cardinal* (Madison, WI), March 22, 2018.

⁴⁷ TAA-Madison, “GAs Mobilize to Save Fee Payment Flexibility – TAA – Graduate Worker Union of UW-Madison,” March 23, 2018, <https://taa-madison.org/gas-mobilize-to-save-fee-payment-flexibility/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

leaning on affective appeals, TAA worker-organizers anticipated that administrators would feel bad, and perhaps embarrassed, about the conditions under which their graduate students worked.

On the one hand, the success of the campaign is owed in part to the fact that its members' desired outcome, a delayed payment deadline, did not fundamentally threaten administrators' attention to maintaining the unimpeded funding of the university. Indeed, reverting to the later payment deadline date would not jeopardize the money that the university received through student fees but merely shifted when the fees would be paid. Administrators may have determined that conceding on this small issue would quell a campaign that was gaining public attention. As such, I would argue that the campaign was successful in part because it did not require significant consciousness-raising or mobilization under the banner of graduate student workers *as workers*, which would have produced a different affective relation to the fees and required more extensive consciousness-raising efforts. It did not require that the union question the imposition of the fees as a politicized workers' rights issue, only a personal one. Aside from more labor-minded workers and worker-organizers, the majority of graduate assistants were not required to see themselves as members of the university workforce in order to recognize the effects of the student fee deadline on their lives. In this regard, the union demonstrated a kairotic awareness of the level of class consciousness of its membership. By structuring its members' participation through a framework of personal, rather than political, grievance, the union did not set up administrators as class antagonists, only personal foes.

At the same time, this strategy came with downstream consequences to organizing a working-class counterpublic around a collective identity as workers with agency to represent their own best interests, as the TAA had done in 1970. Appealing with deference to the enlightened sensibilities of caring administrators risked individualizing a collective grievance

and limiting the horizon of political activity to personal testimony. I would argue that the union's campaign tactics actually reified graduate student workers' identities as aggrieved students, a decision that may have undermined the ensuing TAA actions. Under the logics of the neoliberal university, students are seen as customers who need to be kept happy. While I am not saying that the campaign victory was immaterial to graduate student workers, the strategy distanced graduate workers from a working-class rhetoric by reinforcing the existing power dynamics and situating graduate workers as aggrieved customers to be placated. Indeed, in their framing of graduate worker subjectivity, the TAA did not seriously invoke the issue of decision-making that is central to a labor identity in the workplace (and which I explore further in the following chapter). Framing the issue as one of personal injustice circumvented a discourse that directly contested how the decision came to be made unilaterally; instead, this strategy normalized the decision-making hierarchy at the university by placing the issue of fees largely outside the realm of graduate worker decision-making. Framing fees as a personal injustice mobilized graduate student workers who may have felt disrespected by the university and compassionate to the plight of others, but who did not necessarily see their interests as antagonistic to administrators'. It trafficked in affective arguments but did not tie these arguments to broader neoliberal logics around the labor practices of the university and the financial obligations funded through student fees.

Moreover, the ways in which graduate student workers highlighted the individualization of the burden of segregated fees had unfortunate resonances with the tactics used by conservative students and legislators to undermine the fees' goals of fostering viewpoint diversity. Conservative students had long attempted to "opt out" of mandatory student fees by pointing out the "liberal" bias in how fees are allocated; in a letter to the editor in the student newspaper *The*

Badger Herald, UW undergraduate Abby Streu lamented that “My fees fund religions that I don’t follow. There are no Protestant groups, but my money goes to an Atheist group, a Muslim group, a Catholic group. Not one group in the GSSF [General Student Services Fund] represents me, and yet I’m helping with funding.”⁴⁹ As with the TAA’s analysis, Streu implies that the individual burden of segregated fees is unfair; the title of the letter, “Here’s why segregated fees are the worst,” could just as easily have been written by one of the graduate students mentioned above. In lacking a structural argument to the political and economic valences of segregated fees in the neoliberal funding model of the university, the pleas of graduate student workers and worker-organizers risked perspectival distortion. In other words, the TAA’s reticence to connect segregated fees as personal injustice to the larger tactic by which universities exploit graduate student workers left the organization vulnerable to inconsistent messaging.

The TAA used the student fee deadline to rally graduate students around feelings of disrespect and injustice, a tactic that successfully had the fee deadline reverted while evading engagement with broader critiques of and resistance to the neoliberalization of the university and the administration’s unilateral decision-making. At the same time, this framing provided its administrative audience a way to demonstrate responsiveness to graduate student concerns without needing to offer more meaningful concessions to graduate students *as workers*. Rhetorically analyzing this stage of the campaign demonstrates both the strengths and the limitations of tactics that individualize collective grievances and refrain from drawing clearer connections between feelings of personal injustice at one’s material conditions and the decision-making structures underwriting these conditions. Moreover, analyzing this campaign recognizes

⁴⁹ Abby Streu, “Here’s Why Segregated Fees Are the Worst,” *The Badger Herald*, March 22, 2018, <https://badgerherald.com/opinion/2018/03/22/heres-why-segregated-fees-are-the-worst/>.

the complications that can arise by eschewing class consciousness-raising efforts and leaning into the construction of *student*, rather than worker, grievances.

TAA Campaign, Stage Two: Exploited Graduate Workers and Full Fee Relief

After the success of the TAA's payment deadline campaign, the union began demanding full financial coverage of mandatory student fees for graduate student workers. This time, worker-organizers revised the campaign's messaging. The campaign centered the language of employment in its public-facing materials, refuting the notion that graduate student workers were "students first" or that their employment fell outside the typical employer-employee relationship. The union's campaign foregrounded the fact that graduate student workers at UW–Madison experienced segregated fees in ways connected to their status as exploited laborers in the university system: as a form of wage theft.⁵⁰ The official slogan was noted on one of the union's buttons from the campaign: "Fees Are Wage Theft." By invoking the language of "wage theft," the union sought to position mandatory student fees within the employer-employee relationship, constitutive of the class dynamic between graduate workers and the university. Moreover, union worker-organizers used this language to expose as hollow the frequent assertion that graduate student workers are students, not workers. By challenging this logic through the invocation of "wage theft," the TAA shifted to embrace the language of employment, exploitation, and labor concerning graduate student workers; doing so provided the preconditions for a structural

⁵⁰ Wage theft refers to the practice of employers denying workers the full wages or benefits to which they are entitled. Economic Policy Institute, "Employers Steal Billions from Workers' Paychecks Each Year: Survey Data Show Millions of Workers Are Paid Less than the Minimum Wage, at Significant Cost to Taxpayers and State Economies," Accessed December 6, 2021. <https://www.epi.org/publication/employers-steal-billions-from-workers-paychecks-each-year/>.

analysis of the university that might promote a sense of solidarity and shared injustice among people across campus.

However, even with their new recognition of fees as a workplace issue, the union's messaging at times reinforced neoliberal logics. In one of the more widely distributed posters during the campaign, the TAA sought to shame administrators and rally graduate workers by comparing Wisconsin's failure to cover student fees with peer institutions that covered between 70 and 100 percent. The poster was divided into two columns which displayed the logos of UW's peer institutions—the Universities of Illinois, California, North Carolina, and more—alongside the percentage of fee coverage the schools offered their graduate workers, in each case between 70 and 100 percent fee remission. Above these columns are the words “ALL THESE SCHOOLS PROVIDE FEE RELIEF FOR GRAD WORKERS.” At the bottom of the poster sits the University of Wisconsin's logo, encircled by a red box next to the number “0%” and the question, “WHY NOT UW–MADISON?” As with the previous year's campaign, this poster implicitly relied on fostering a sense of injustice over the situation of graduate student workers at UW; unlike the previous year's campaign, however, it did so using the framework of market competition. As austerity budgets necessitate that universities “compete” with peer institutions for graduate student labor, the TAA's strategy to demonstrate the ways that UW–Madison lags behind poses a question to which there is a “common sense,” market-based solution: cover the fees in order to compete with other schools. Here, the union doubled down on the neoliberal maxim of market competition and aligned itself with administrators' interest in remaining competitive in the market for top-tier graduate students. In so doing, however, the TAA's framing compromised its analysis of student fees in the landscape of the neoliberal university, choosing not to educate its members on the broader neoliberal logics that displace the costs of

public education onto students through unilateral decision-making by a managerial university administrator class. In my reading, this tactic undermined the resilience of union members to fight for anti-neoliberal reforms in the university by allowing the logics of extraction that undergird student fees to remain concealed.

Further, the statistics from the poster were never addressed or referred to by UW administrators, perhaps because they were at odds with the university's national and international rankings. Despite the fact that the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not provide fee relief for graduate workers, its graduate programs are ranked among the best in the world and in 2019 was ranked the 13th best public college or university by U.S. News and World Report (Meyerhofer 2019b). This analysis aligns with Goodwin et al.'s assertion that the statistical health of the neoliberal university outweighs personal or even collective grievance, and it calls into question the efficacy of discursive, market-based appeals to employers and administrators that I examine further in the following chapter.⁵¹ Whereas Goodwin et al. contend that academic unions should strategically use the language of neoliberalism in their appeals to administrative audiences, the failure of the TAA's campaign to secure full fee relief raises complicated questions for the potential pitfalls and limitations of speaking the language of the market for groups, like graduate labor unions, who are enmeshed within asymmetrical power relations with the neoliberal university.

Near the end of the 2018-2019 school year, the TAA brought its demand for full fee relief to Bascom Hall, the home of the UW administration, with a multi-hour action of over 400 participants. The action was called "Sit In at Bascom Hall," summoning images of the longstanding protest strategy of occupying a building until certain demands are met; in the labor

⁵¹ Goodwin et al, "Accountable," 32.

tradition, “sit-in” or “sit-down” strikes were popularized by the successful Flint sit-down strike of 1936-1937, in which unionized workers at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan physically occupied the plant and refused to leave, thus preventing automobile production from continuing uninterrupted.⁵² The TAA’s “sit-in” was not an indefinite strike at a centralized place of production like a factory or office, but rather a timebound action at a symbolic location that aimed to unify a counterpublic around their shared status as workers to build public pressure on administrators. Even as it did not go as far as other labor sit-ins, the event sought to, in the idiom of labor, “escalate” the confrontation with the administration, instilling the sense among graduate student workers that more adversarial action might soon be required.

Finally, though in muted ways, this action invoked the language of disruptive labor predicated on the identity of “worker.” Teaching and research assistants were encouraged to sit in the hallways with their grading or research work, making their labor visible to an administrative audience and to other graduate instructors.⁵³ The union also situated graduate student workers at Wisconsin within a nationally active graduate labor movement. In one hallway there hung a large piece of blank paper where attendees could write notes of solidarity to graduate student workers at the University of Illinois–Chicago, who were at that moment on strike over the very same fee issue as the TAA. In another hallway, worker-organizers hung a banner where attendees could write their responses to the question, “If our admin do not listen, what do we do next? How do we win?” Many of the responses, as noted by a *Wisconsin State Journal* article covering the event, “represent clear escalations from the non-confrontational style

⁵² Catherine Paul, “Flint Sit-Down Strike (1936-1937),” Social Welfare History Project, May 12, 2020, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/flint-sit-strike-1936-1937/>.

⁵³ Kelly Meyerhofer, “UW-Madison graduate students stage sit-in seeking fee waivers, better working conditions.” *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 6, 2019.

on display,” reflecting an untapped radicalism among TAA members that the union struggled to deploy.⁵⁴ In one of the more explicitly educational moments, international graduate student workers informed sit-in attendees on the politics of the International Student Fee by connecting the Fee’s sanctioning of surveillance to the material constraints placed upon them by their F-1 visa status. The action aimed to bind graduate workers together around shared grievances and did not shy away from the depiction of graduate students as “demanding.”

Even with language that foregrounded the labor conditions of graduate student workers, the event was largely seen from the outside as “non-confrontational,” underscoring the uneven tactics behind the event.⁵⁵ Many graduate workers still remained committed to the norms around decorum and civility characteristic of broader public understandings of the university; thus, even as chanting took place inside the halls and the presence of 400 attendees filled the space in a way that the previous rally did not, workers did not interact with decision-makers. Whereas the 2018 rally delivered a petition directly to upper-level administrators, this rally was contained to the front half of the building, allowing administrative work to continue unimpeded in the back half. Indeed, the echoes of the chanting hardly made it to the offices near the back of the building. Thus, the potential unruliness of this action was still limited by an air of respect for the work being done in UW’s administrative seat. While it is possible to read this event as disruptive, given that it gathered a mass of people in a building dedicated to otherwise quiet office work, the protestors pursued no face-to-face confrontation with university decision-makers and did not prepare for disrupting “business as usual,” a requirement for more materially coercive coordinated labor action. Read in this way, the event suggests an uneven rendering of working-

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

class consciousness-raising that effectively hindered the union's ability to then transmute the feelings of graduate student workers following the event into a willingness to directly intervene in the university's day-to-day functioning for a more sustained and indeterminate length of time. The sit-in displayed trappings of radical collective action but did not prepare graduate workers to take that next step toward a labor stoppage.

Further, the sit-in did not seek to raise awareness about the administration's strategies disempowering the union and its members—stalling, closed-door meetings, empty overtures to dialogue—in such a way that might have fostered a consciously confrontational stance with administrators. When contrasted with the tactics utilized by the TAA in the previous chapter, in which worker-organizers used the communicative avenues at their disposal to publicize administrative inaction and stalling, the failure to do so is all the more notable. Large swaths of rank-and-file graduate student workers at this rally were not prepared to confront administrators' expected response to the union's demands nor their many efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the union and its members' grievances. Without these intentional and difficult efforts to prepare a greater number of graduate workers to take more disruptive action, the growth of the fee campaign stalled following the sit-in.

The unions' attempt to solidify the status of "workers" for its constituency was deflected by administrators, who took two weeks to respond to the union's demands. In their written response to TAA co-presidents McMahon and Trongone that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Vice Chancellor Heller and Dean Karpus wrote, "Philosophically, we believe all students—graduate and undergraduate alike—must pay segregated fees to support high-quality services...In our view, allowing certain populations exceptions or opt-outs could lead to others asking to be similarly exempted and ultimately undermine the funding model that provides

valuable services to all students.”⁵⁶ Here, administrators disregard the union’s claims on the grounds of their employment status, again reasserting the logic that all *students* pay the fees. By framing the union’s grievance as one being made by “certain populations,” they ignored the specific class nature of the TAA’s argument of fees as a workplace issue, misrepresenting the union’s claims as an assertion of special privilege for graduate students rather than exploitation of graduate student *workers*. There is a knowing double-speak at play here that I explore more fully in the following chapter. In this case, they used the broad latitude afforded administrators to set the terms of debate, framing graduate workers as unhappy students in order to naturalize the material hardship incurred by rising student fees and unilaterally define to whom those fees are assessed.

TAA worker-organizers attempted to counter administrative rhetoric by publishing the letter with annotations. Where Karpus and Heller reaffirmed their policy to increase stipends rather than provide “exemptions from fees,” TAA worker-organizers noted in red ink, “Vice Chancellor Heller and Dean Karpus are mischaracterizing our argument. The TAA is not asking for exemptions from fees. We are calling on UW–Madison to provide relief from these fees as a condition of our employment.”⁵⁷ The TAA’s public response to the letter explicitly named the tactics deployed to undermine graduate workers’ workplace grievances. As with the TAA in 1970 detailed in the previous chapter, union leaders in 2019 sought to expose to unengaged graduate workers the administrative double-speak that otherwise occurred out-of-view. And yet, TAA worker-organizers did not widely circulate this letter calling out administrative inaction. It

⁵⁶ Heller and Karpus, 2019.

⁵⁷ TAA, “Administration Response to Graduate Workers Found Inadequate and Misleading,” *TAA–Madison*, April 24, 2019, <https://taa-madison.org/administration-response-to-graduate-workers-found-inadequate-and-misleading/>.

does not appear on their social media platforms, but was instead posted only to the TAA website, ensuring a smaller circulation. Thus, even as the union's messaging turned toward an explicit strategy of "naming and shaming" administrative tactics, there opened a gap between the consciousness and orientation toward administrators of the various layers of graduate workers at the university. The "core" of TAA members—those who attended the meetings, responded to the organizing calls, and shaped the action of the union in small and large ways—were receptive to the union's attempts to present as more antagonistic to university administrators, seeing both the build-up of the "sit-in" and the underwhelming administrative response. However, TAA worker-organizers failed to circulate this attempt to frame administrators as antagonists in ways that would sustain discontent among a broad layer of graduate workers.

Without a clear path forward following the exhaustion of protest tactics that could be contained and redirected by administrators, union organizers turned to genuinely disruptive tactics. The office occupation that opened this chapter took place three weeks after the TAA's sit-in, and as mentioned, chilled the relationship between administrators and the union. Even though the Dean of the Graduate School shoved a protestor against his office wall in attempts to push him back out the door, the TAA did not translate the occupation into a more widespread commitment among rank-and-file graduate workers to disrupt "business as usual." Moreover, the occupation was quickly rebuked by an official statement from the university, which announced that "UW-Madison is disappointed by the student actions, as the university has engaged in good faith discussions over graduate student compensation and policy concerns."⁵⁸ In part, as I have argued, the campaign stalled because union leaders, myself included, struggled to connect the

⁵⁸ "University Statement on Graduate Student Protest," April 26, 2019, <https://news.wisc.edu/university-statement-on-graduate-student-protest/>.

material conditions of graduate workers to the larger totality of neoliberal logics that determined Wisconsin administrators' decision-making and that made non-disruptive tactics ineffective. Additionally, the union did not meaningfully integrate efforts to raise graduate worker consciousness over the antagonism between administrative interests and the union's demands, which limited its ability to translate student fees from an individual student concern to a collective workplace concern. Without education that utilized a working-class standpoint, one more equipped to view the totality of labor relations and the role of graduate labor in the neoliberal university, the TAA failed to cohere a working-class counterpublic able to meet the discursive and material challenge posed by a formidable and well-resourced administration.

In my reading of the TAA's campaign, the office occupation represented a final effort by radical union organizers to voice their outrage at administrators' refusal to act and offer concessions, though it ultimately had the effect of producing a divided consciousness over the radical tactics and image of the union. The ambient rhetorical circulation of neoliberal values, and the union's failure to articulate them to a broader audience, meant that rank-and-file workers may have seen administrators failing to act not out of their own administrative commitments to protecting fees as a revenue stream for infrastructural costs, but out of a failure of the union's effectiveness to persuade administrators with superior arguments. Indeed, without efforts to interpret administrative tactics through the lens of neoliberal rationality, it can easily appear that administrators were simply unmoved by graduate workers' affective appeals and timebound public actions.

Conclusion

Looking at the TAA's campaign, in which the union struggled to mobilize graduate workers *as workers* even as it won material improvements in their working conditions,

complicates how we understand rhetorical efficacy in neoliberal institutions. Without cohering a durable working-class counterpublic that acts from its class position in institutional structures and can compellingly challenge discourses that hinder greater labor consciousness, workers are susceptible to passively accepting the erosion of both workplace rights and gains conceded by employers from previous organizing campaigns. Successfully challenging the neoliberal university exceeds discursive arguments, whether using market or non-market rhetorics, as I explore more fully in the following chapter. I agree with Nancy Welch's contention that histories of progress for academic workers' inclusion in higher education decision-making are incomplete without the histories of "immoderate struggle" waged by class-conscious academics.⁵⁹ And I am likewise moved by Dana Cloud's insistence that we "fight the temptation to make a virtue out of the meager symbolic substitutes for redress offered by employers."⁶⁰ The TAA's efforts around financial relief from mandatory student fees speaks to the limits of individual workers' rhetorical activity when disconnected from larger political analysis.

This chapter suggests that organizers of working-class counterpublics in the neoliberal era must strive to move the terrain of struggle beyond individual grievances and toward recognition of a shared class project. To be clear, I am not arguing that these projects disregard identity-based oppressions, as they are constitutive of capitalist class relations. Rather, I am arguing for solidarity, which recognizes how, in ways big and small, grievances affecting one group affect everyone who shares that class location. This is an eminently challenging mission in contemporary times, as Rob Asen argues that neoliberalism "disaggregat[es] a public good into

⁵⁹ Nancy Welch, "La Langue de Coton: How Neoliberal Language Pulls the Wool over Faculty Governance," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 11, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 552.

⁶⁰ Dana L. Cloud, "Fighting Words: Labor and the Limits of Communication at Staley, 1993 to 1996," *Management Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (May 2005): 535.

individuals who can only act alone.”⁶¹ Thus, to cohere a working-class counterpublic in higher education around broad labor demands requires both identifying and contesting neoliberal tactics and trends. The TAA’s struggle to do so had the effect of reinforcing the academic labor system and preventing cross-campus awareness and solidarity. Because the issue was presented as one only affecting graduate workers, the union was unable to marshal support from undergraduate students, on-campus custodial or building workers, student workers, and the broader Madison community—all key allies who nonetheless did not see themselves as implicated in the issue of student fees and the funding model of the university. Asen suggests, and I agree, that building broad-based coalitions and “networked publics” who recognize their connections to one another constitutes a formidable and necessary task to combat the pernicious effects of neoliberal ideology and policy. As he writes, arguing for a greater attention to local engagement, “To be sure, relationships alone cannot guarantee a vibrant and just democracy, but it is difficult to imagine a democratically oriented critical publicity as a process of isolated individual activity.”⁶² Building a working-class counterpublic, then, necessitates building pathways for identification and collective action across perceived differences.

This chapter contributes to rhetorical studies of the university by offering graduate labor as a key piece in deconstructing the university’s rigid rhetorical order. More than faculty and undergraduate students, graduate workers occupy a liminal rhetorical space as both worker and student that undermines the university’s efforts at hegemonic self-representation. When organized through a collective labor identity, graduate workers’ discursive and material challenges to the university’s decision-making processes can expose with greater clarity the

⁶¹ Robert Asen, “Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 331.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 344.

contradictions between administrative discourse and action. At the same time, as the case study demonstrates, without sustained consciousness-raising, graduate workers can be overwhelmed by dominant rhetorical constructions circulating in the university and beyond of graduate labor and university good-will.

In the next chapter, I analyze a different, similarly consequential tactic in the TAA's campaign around the fee payment deadline: the introduction of a resolution in the Faculty Senate body that would have put faculty senators on the record as supporting the TAA's demands. I move the arena of analysis away from one largely within the union's control to one that is overseen by administrators and faculty members and that maintains strict academic norms around rational, reasoned debate that graduate workers at the meeting attempted to circumvent. Further, I explore the rhetorical circulation of "shared governance" as *topos* that blunts critique of unilateral decision-making powers. Unlike with fellow graduate workers, the union used decision-making as a key piece of debate in shared governance; and yet, as I argue, the arena of shared governance was not one hospitable to challenging the institutional structure of decision-making powers from the discrete standpoint of graduate workers.

Chapter Four

Shared Governance as *Topos* and Asymmetries of Meaning in Deliberative Arenas

In September 2013, the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and Wisconsin state legislators held a joint conference, titled “Finding Common Ground,” to smooth over relationships that had recently begun to sour.¹ During a panel discussion on the issue of shared governance—the issue of which constituencies, exactly, get to participate meaningfully in university decision-making—the highest-ranking member of the Wisconsin State Legislature asked a rhetorical question that took many faculty members by surprise.² Assembly Speaker Robin Vos asked a leading question: “Does the role of allowing faculty to make a huge number of decisions help the system or hurt the system?”³ Wisconsin’s shared governance system, celebrated by many as one of the university’s most attractive features, was codified in state statute and had historically guaranteed considerable input in institutional decision-making from faculty members, academic staff, and students. Calling on university chancellors to “truly be the chief executive officers,” Vos imagined the university as a corporation in which university decision-making was consolidated around senior-level administrators and the Board of Regents, necessitating they remove barriers to the unimpeded exercise of employer authority. Vos’s

¹ Dan Simmons, “GOP Lawmakers Sharply Criticize UW System Officials over \$648 Million Cash Reserve,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 19, 2013, https://www.wiscnews.com/news/local/education/university/gop-lawmakers-sharply-criticize-uw-system-officials-over-648-million-cash-reserve/article_1ae58a33-b4b4-5b0f-aab2-2edbd9e62c21.html; Colleen Flaherty, “New Threat to Shared Governance,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/09/09/wisconsin-faculty-object-idea-shared-governance-should-change>.

² More specifically, by shared governance, I mean the active power-sharing of university stakeholders in university decision-making through institutionalized governance bodies, though the specific mechanisms of shared governance vary from campus to campus.

³ Flaherty, “New Threat.”

comments sparked outrage from faculty, yet they could not muster sufficient resistance to prevent his vision from coming true. Two years later in 2015, Governor Scott Walker signed into law Act 55, which finalized the transformation of genuine shared governance between faculty and administrators from a once-robust practice to one of clear subordination, what rhetorician Nancy Welch terms a de facto “ceremonial advisory role.”⁴

Though these changes to faculty shared governance did not fundamentally change how the TAA advocated for the interests of graduate workers, they served as a reminder of the union's distance from official channels for university decision-making. Since 1973, the year in which the statute concerning shared governance was written into Wisconsin law, the only parties explicitly represented by shared governance have been the Board of Regents, the UW System President, the Chancellors, faculty, academic staff, and students. The graduate student worker identity that I have plumbed throughout this dissertation has never fit neatly into any of the categories statutorily protected under state law, which is one explanation for why administrators in recent years have sought to situate TAA grievances under the purview of the student government body.⁵ This lack of recognition of the category of “graduate worker” in shared governance has historically bolstered the TAA’s claims that representation through the union remains *the* avenue for graduate employee participation in campuswide decision-making.⁶ Graduate employees’

⁴ Nancy Welch, “La Langue de Coton: How Neoliberal Language Pulls the Wool over Faculty Governance,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 11, no. 3 (October 1, 2011), 552.

⁵ TAA-Madison, “Our Employment Contract Is at Risk,” March 15, 2017, <https://us4.campaign-archive.com/?e=8dcf3694ff&u=f6070fe9d34623daabf52814c&id=29c746d20e>.

⁶ There is no pretext, legal or otherwise, that prevents universities and state legislatures from establishing decision-making arenas for graduate workers to interface with administrators. If they wanted to, universities could, as could any corporation, voluntarily enter into a cooperative power-sharing relationship with academic workers. However, by way of a class analysis, the laws of capitalist accumulation necessitate that universities, like corporations, contest

historical absence from representation as workers through shared governance—compounded by 2011’s Act 10, detailed in the previous chapter, which severed the TAA’s ability to collectively bargain over workplace issues—has ensured that the collective voice of graduate workers *as workers* in the neoliberal university grows increasingly distant from campus decision-making venues.

Even so, the TAA has sometimes strategically turned to shared governance bodies to build support for its campaigns from sympathetic faculty and undergraduates. This was the case at the final Faculty Senate meeting of the 2017-2018 school year, when TAA organizers sought to raise awareness among faculty members on the contours of its campaign over mandatory student fees, as detailed in part in the previous chapter.⁷ There, sympathetic faculty members were set to bring a resolution to the body expressing support for the union’s campaign demands. The proposed resolution had four interrelated goals, short- and long-term, that called on the Chancellor to: 1) oblige the Bursar’s Office to consult with graduate student representatives before making changes to payment policies, 2) allow graduate workers to pay mandatory fees after receipt of their third paycheck, 3) take steps toward a policy of full remission of mandatory fees, and 4) provide Faculty Senate with an update in one year’s time.⁸ At the meeting, TAA members shared collected testimonies about the effects of mandatory student fees. The resolution was subject to intense debate by faculty members, administrators, and graduate workers, yet it

unionization because it undermines their ability to extract surplus value from low-wage workers and maintain control over the conditions under which work is performed.

⁷ The Faculty Senate is the chief governance body representing faculty at the university. “Information for Senators,” Office of the Secretary of the Faculty, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://secfac.wisc.edu/governance/faculty-senate/senator-information/>.

⁸ “Resolution on Payment of Mandatory Fees by Graduate Assistants,” May 7, 2018, <https://kb.wisc.edu/images/group222/shared/2018-05-07FacultySenate/2756ResolutiononPaymentofMandatoryFees.pdf>.

never came to a vote because the meeting lost quorum. As an attendee at the meeting, I am confident in saying that, had the resolution come to a vote, the contentiousness of the debate suggests that it would have been significantly amended, if not likely voted against.

In this chapter, I analyze two, interrelated rhetorical valences of shared governance as it relates to decision-making processes in the neoliberal university. First, I analyze the circulation of shared governance as a power-laden *topos* at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, specifically, and the neoliberal university system more generally.⁹ That is, I examine how the *topos* of shared governance is deployed rhetorically across asymmetrical power relations to activate particular sensibilities toward the neoliberal university, its administrators, and the power of decision-making arenas at the university. I contend that shared governance as *topos* provides enduring rhetorical utility to administrators and other high-level decision-makers as a rhetorical strategy for exercising power and aligning shared governance participants with administrative decision-making priorities. Framed another way, I argue that the failure of faculty, staff, students, and graduate workers to acknowledge the material and discursive transformations to decision-making processes, including shared governance, contributes to the ongoing difficulty in building coalitions that might form a resistance to the neoliberalization of the university. While I am not saying that shared governance participants are unaware of the reality of shared

⁹ Ralph Cintron define *topoi* as “storehouses of social energy” that “organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions in the lifeworld.” That is, *topoi* entangle material conditions, beliefs, histories, and ideologies to, as Candice Rai writes, “activat[e] discourse already circulating in the social imagination.” Like both Cintron and Rai, I conceive of class relations and antagonisms as a propelling feature of the social energy and force of *topoi*—especially as they involve ostensibly democratic deliberation between publics across class locations.

Ralph Cintron, “Democracy and Its Limitations,” in *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement*, ed. John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan (University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 100; Candice Rai, *Democracy’s Lot* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 66.

governance or lack any agency in such spaces, my argument suggests a real urgency in developing alternative frameworks, like a labor identity, for imagining how faculty, staff, students, and workers participate in decision-making processes in the university.

Second, I offer a rhetorical analysis of the aforementioned Faculty Senate meeting, tracing the discursive activity of administrators, faculty, and graduate workers within the boundaries of that particular decision-making arena. My analysis affords rhetoricians a lens through which to identify latent class antagonisms in decision-making spaces, with the possibility of heightening class consciousness by exposing the rhetorical boundaries that delimit inclusion in university governance. Attending to the (in)ability for workers to make decisions governing their labor or participate as full actors in university governance bodies draws potential lines of solidarity between undergraduate students, graduate workers, academic staff, and faculty, all of whose capacities for meaningful input have been diminished by administrative prerogative.

To offer a brief overview of this chapter: in the following section, I detail the history of shared governance at Wisconsin, including its extreme transformation in the last decade as a result of the incursion of neoliberal rationality into the governance of the university and state. From there, I provide a short history of shared governance as a practice in universities more broadly and unpack its rhetorical valences to identify how its enduring rhetorical utility relies on exploiting asymmetries of meaning, suppressing class-conscious discourses, and separating the university from a traditional worksite. To conclude, I engage in a close reading of the Faculty Senate meeting in which the aforementioned resolution was discussed. I identify how TAA spokespeople and members of Faculty Senate sought to position themselves as interlocutors with the authority to make decisions with administrators. Ultimately, this rhetorical positioning

undermined the ability of TAA and faculty members to name or challenge the unequal relations of power in university decision-making arenas.

Shared Governance at the University of Wisconsin

In 1973, a state statute following the merger of UW–Madison and the Wisconsin State University system codified the university’s shared governance structure. Wisconsin Statute 36.09(4) outlined the responsibilities of the Board of Regents, The UW System President, the Chancellors, faculty, academic staff, and students. Regarding faculty responsibilities, the statute stated that

The faculty of each institution, subject to the responsibilities and powers of the board, the president, and the chancellor of such institution, shall be vested with responsibility for the immediate governance of such institution and shall actively participate in institutional policy development. As such, the faculty shall have the primary responsibility for academic and educational activities and faculty personnel matters.¹⁰

This language gave faculty clear jurisdiction over the activities and matters that fell under their expertise, while also leaving ambiguous the nature of the phrase “subject to the responsibilities and powers of.” This ambiguity cemented a set of overlapping jurisdictions that both produced the conditions for relative participatory parity between administrators and faculty and allowed faculty to expect reasonable consideration in their governance mandates.

In Wisconsin, the expectation of shared governance protections for faculty was upheld in a 1992 lawsuit, *Spoto v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System*.¹¹ The lawsuit

¹⁰ Wisconsin Senate Bill 2, Statute §36.09(4) (1973), <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/1973/related/acts/335>.

¹¹ *Spoto v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System*, Dane County Circuit Branch 14, Case No. 92 CV 5046, 15 (1994–95).

was brought against the Board of Regents after the Board unilaterally imposed a salary plan on faculty without consulting faculty shared governance bodies. In ruling in favor of faculty decision-making powers, the Dane County Circuit Court ruled that the faculty being “subject to” the powers of the University’s administration was not equivalent to “subordinate to.” Here, the Circuit Court upheld the principle of shared governance necessitating meaningful faculty participation in affairs for which the faculty has “primary responsibility.” In the case of this lawsuit, the protections of shared governance under state statute allowed the faculty to remain in control of the material conditions affecting their work—this normally being the purview of a labor union.

The neoliberalization of higher education in the decades following the Spoto decision, as described in the previous chapter, has meant that wide participation in institutional governance has come to be seen as a threat by administrators and legislators, as well as by credit-rating agencies like Moody’s Investors Service that determine university’s creditworthiness.¹² As detailed in the introduction to this chapter, 2013 saw the convening of a “UW–System Shared Governance Reform” workgroup to rethink shared governance relations.¹³ The “Scope of the Workgroup” section read

The current shared governance system has created a problematic relationship between faculty and student governments and also between the university system and the Legislature. The UW-System Shared Governance Reform Workgroup is tasked with an examination of §36.09 and its division of powers. Workgroup deliverables should include a thorough consideration of the balance of power between members of the shared governance body as well as body membership, examination of other state university

¹² Eleni Schirmer, “It’s Not Just Students Drowning in Debt. Colleges Are Too!,” *The Nation*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/student-debt-university-credit/>.

¹³ Mark Pitsch, “UW, Lawmakers Seek Common Ground at Sometimes Contentious Meeting,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 6, 2013, https://madison.com/news/local/education/university/uw-lawmakers-seek-common-ground-at-sometimes-contentious-meeting/article_993441ca-1604-5682-98af-e8c522754ec9.html.

system governance structures, and suggestions for streamlining [the] shared governance process.¹⁴

The workgroup was clearly intended to rid the UW System of the institution of faculty governance as it hurtled toward privatization and austerity; as David Harvey contends, neoliberalism's suspicion of democracy necessitates synthesizing state decision-making with the needs of capitalist accumulation.¹⁵ The intention was to re-write the language of shared governance to transfer power away from faculty.

The workgroup's recommendations made their way to the desk of Governor Scott Walker in 2015, and he signed into law Act 55 that confirmed the "ceremonial" reality of the future of faculty governance. Most prominently, in Statute 36.09(4), where faculty had previously been granted "the primary responsibility for academic and educational activities and faculty personnel matters," they would now have "the primary responsibility for advising the chancellor regarding academic and educational activities and faculty personnel matters" (emphasis added).¹⁶ Similarly, the law offered a definitive definition for the phrase "subject to," previously left ambiguous, which would now mean "subordinate to." As such, the statute now read, "The faculty of each institution, subject to the responsibilities and powers of the board, the president, and the chancellor of such institution..."¹⁷ which meant that the faculty were subordinate to these administrators. The same changes were made with respect to students. In statute 36.09(5), the phrase indicating that students "shall be active participants in the immediate governance of and

¹⁴ Pat Schneider, "UW Faculty Say GOP Gunning for Shared Governance," *The Cap Times*, September 9, 2013, https://captimes.com/news/local/writers/pat_schneider/uw-faculty-say-gop-gunning-for-shared-governance/article_283571a4-94f2-5bce-a4d9-b353d7dd0104.html.

¹⁵ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

¹⁶ Wisconsin Legislature, Act 55, §36.09(4) (July 12, 2015), <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2015/related/acts/55>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

policy development for such institutions” was deleted and replaced with language indicating that they likewise were to serve in an advisory role to the chancellor.¹⁸ These small substitutions continue to have enormous consequences for the university’s trajectory and for the capacity for faculty, students, and other campus community members to imagine themselves as engaged and consequential decision-makers in the University of Wisconsin’s future. Kaufman-Osborn calls Act 55 “but one more tactic within a comprehensive neoliberal campaign designed to remove constraints on the unfettered exercise of employer prerogative.”¹⁹ With the passage of Act 55, meaningful shared governance, for all intents and purposes, became a thing of the past.

The Rhetoric of Shared Governance in Higher Education

Shared governance is not unique to the University of Wisconsin System; it has long been a feature of the modern American university system, gaining wide acceptance in both private and public schools, in research universities and liberal arts colleges. Calls for shared governance grew alongside the development of a professional identity among university faculty at the turn of the 20th century, spurred on by the 1915 founding of the first professional association for university faculty, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). The founding of the AAUP, writes Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, enabled the formation of a collective professional identity for university professors premised on advanced training and specialized expertise in educational and academic matters that warranted inclusion in campus governance.²⁰ Indeed, since its first statement on shared governance in 1920, written by the Committee on College and University Governance, the AAUP has continued to weigh in on the state of higher education

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, “Disenchanted Professionals: The Politics of Faculty Governance in the Neoliberal Academy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 1 (March 2017), 112.

²⁰ Ibid.

governance, including in its refined 1966 “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities” and its 2014 “Faculty Communication with Governing Boards: Best Practices.”²¹ For over a century, the AAUP has figured as a bullhorn for faculty interests in educational and academic matters.

While the AAUP’s struggle to develop robust shared governance practices has contributed to meaningful governance and workplace reforms, it has come with not-inconsequential ideological tradeoffs. The professional identity assumed by faculty participating in shared governance relies on the enactment of rigid rhetorical distinctions separating academic workers from traditional employees and universities from traditional worksites. The AAUP’s 1915 “Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure” declared that the “social function” of the professional scholar distinguished the university from an “ordinary business venture.”²² In his 1919 AAUP presidential address, Arthur Lovejoy asserted that faculty had a different relationship to their employers from “that of the wage-earner bargaining with the private capitalist over the division of the profits of industry,” which indicated the pull toward professionalization and the de-emphasizing of conventional employer-employee relations.²³ This language cultivated a faculty sensibility that committed its adherents to, as Larry Gerber writes in *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance*, “using their expertise in a disinterested way to advance the common good.” At the same time, Dylan Kaufman-Osborn complicates Gerber’s characterization, contending that this rhetoric of professionalism fortified “specific configurations of power” that foreclosed recognition of faculty members as workers in a labor

²¹ American Association of University Professors, “Resources on Governance,” AAUP, <https://www.aaup.org/our-programs/shared-governance/resources-governance>.

²² American Association of University Professors, “Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure,” *AAUP Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (1915): 17–39.

²³ Arthur Lovejoy, “Annual Message of the President,” *AAUP Bulletin* 5 (1919): 10–40.

system, even as their collective organizing allowed them to secure workplace arrangements like unions.²⁴ From the origins of the AAUP, the professional identity of faculty stressed an apolitical understanding of the production of knowledge that contributed to an incomplete picture of the university's role in broader American class society. As a result, I argue, the rhetoric of shared governance has historically served to mute class-conscious discourses, serving as an explicit rebuke to the presence of a labor identity that might encourage more adversarial perspectives among university faculty.

What this history of shared governance suggests is that it exists at the intersection of competing perspectives over the nature of academic labor. Indeed, shared governance is rhetorically distinguished from union activity or class consciousness-raising through conflicting notions of civility and respect within the university. As Welch writes, popular beliefs on unionism deem it “rowdy,” whereas shared governance “owes its existence to traditions of moderation and civility.”²⁵ At the University of Wisconsin, for instance, the air of reverence for shared governance procedures is present in a yearly email sent by Chancellor Rebecca Blank to all campus members, which opens: “Shared governance is a significant part of what makes the University of Wisconsin–Madison great. We remain committed to shared governance as it has been historically practiced here since the establishment of the UW System more than four decades ago.”²⁶ Blank's email is suffused throughout with laudatory language that stifles criticism of the institution of shared governance and instead portrays it as a thriving, consensual endeavor; she portrays present-day shared governance as part of an uninterrupted past and future of genuine shared decision-making. And yet, in my reading, this email contributes to an ongoing

²⁴ Kaufman-Osborn, “Disenchanted,” 101.

²⁵ Welch, “La Langue de Coton,” 552.

²⁶ Rebecca Blank, “Supporting Shared Governance,” email, September 16, 2019.

obfuscation of the structural limitations of shared governance as a decision-making arena, in addition to contributing to ongoing efforts by administrators to establish and enforce the discursive boundaries of decision-making conversations at Wisconsin.

Put simply, there exists an asymmetry of meaning in shared governance that hides its weakened enforcement mechanisms from the intensity of its positive portrayals. This asymmetry between the discursive circulation of shared governance and its material constraints suggests that the *topos* of shared governance remains rhetorically potent to administrators on account of its polysemy, what Robin Jensen defines as “language with multiple meanings as intended by authors or interpreted by audiences.”²⁷ While rhetoric scholars who interrogated the concept of polysemy in the late 1980s noted polysemy’s potential to activate insurgent textual interpretations that resist dominant paradigms or understandings, polysemous language is just as easily exploited by those in power to maintain the social order and its power relations. Marxist philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle situates this sort of language within capitalist class relations to suggest that “the class enemy...is acutely aware of the importance of the question of language; and that she defends a philosophy of language...that aims to prohibit dialogue or to make it unequal.”²⁸ Seen in this way, the rhetorical functioning of the *topos* of shared governance necessitates attention to how it serves as a rhetorical strategy for high-level administrators and decision-makers to exercise power and shape how faculty, staff, students, and workers interact with shared governance.

As rhetoric scholars have shown, exploiting polysemous language has acute material benefit to power-holders. Christopher Duerringer identifies how private corporations exploit

²⁷ Robin E. Jensen, “Sexual Polysemy: The Discursive Ground of Talk about Sex and Education in U.S. History,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1, no. 4 (December 2008), 397.

²⁸ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 223.

polysemous language in the private sphere to profit in the public sphere, in a process that he terms “rhetorical arbitrage.” Rhetorical arbitrage exploits asymmetries of meaning, what Duerringer defines as “the conscious and unconscious interpretations that we produce and attach to information through the act of communication,” in order to reap maximum benefit.²⁹ It allows private firms to occupy two different political realities simultaneously, one in which they proclaim convenience in the private sector and another in which they profit as a public good, but both byproducts of severely weakened mechanisms for genuine redress or discourse across power differentials. In Duerringer’s analysis of the ride-sharing app Uber, the company assures immediate risk-free profit by claiming to simply provide the technology to connect people to transportation in the private realm rather than function as a transportation enterprise, thus allowing them to evade both taxi regulations and labor law. Capitalist firms can avoid public accountability and skirt regulatory requirements by deploying polysemic language that ensures risk-free profit.

But rhetorical arbitrage also grants decision-makers control over the deliberative arenas where decisions affecting profits are made, be these corporate boardrooms, legislative sessions, or otherwise. Indeed, in the neoliberal era exemplified by stark power asymmetries rooted in undemocratic institutions and vast inequality, asymmetries of meaning are made possible because of the asymmetrical power wielded by corporate boards to determine the terms of work, and thus the terms of exploitation and profit. This asymmetrical power makes possible discourses that evacuate language of meaning and ensure the unobstructed ability for those in power to make decisions about the workplace, whether popular or not. Indeed, a significant part of the material

²⁹ Christopher Michael Duerringer, “Rhetorical Arbitrage: The Rhetoric of the Sharing Economy,” *Communication Theory* 29, no. 4 (November 1, 2019), 389.

conditions under which Uber can profit is the severely weakened and alienated state of their workforce, something that Duerringer underexamines; in other words, Uber can ensure an uncontested decision-making arena that those who perform the labor for the company cannot enter. Thus, it is not just the exploitation of asymmetries of meaning that allows for risk-free profit for such entities, but the actual material exploitation of workers and their inability to access or influence the discursive arenas where language and decisions can be meaningfully debated or challenged. Reading Duerringer's case study by way of its employer-employee relations, we see that Uber's workers cannot easily cohere as a working-class counterpublic because they have little discursive recourse at their disposal by which to challenge how Uber frames its services; they are not all connected at a single worksite and have no means of streamlining communication between one another. Uber categorizes its employees not as workers but as "drivers" or "independent contractors" that simply conduct transactions; the company is able to exploit labor regulations in order to avoid paying wages, providing benefits, offering collective voice through collective bargaining, and more. This, I would argue, does more than ensure Uber risk-free profits: it likewise stymies oppositional rhetorics from workers that challenge how decisions are made and where profits go.

One can see, then, how rhetorical arbitrage may be of great use to institutions, like public universities, that have a history of strong employee protections by way of employer-employee power-sharing and decision-making. These are institutions which, under the neoliberal imperative to remove barriers to capital accumulation and growth, must find ways to subvert the mechanisms ensuring relative participatory parity in decision-making processes without prompting resistance or counterdiscourses that may force the institutions to change course. The continued circulation of the *topoi* of democratic decision-making in the public sphere—even

when such decision-making processes no longer obligate decision-makers to follow through on its outcomes— offers them one way to do so. In the case of Wisconsin, administrators practice rhetorical arbitrage over the *topos* of shared governance to maintain faculty, staff, and student investment in that particular configuration of decision-making power-sharing, a configuration that encourages passive consent, rather than more open dissent, to the ongoing transformations of the University of Wisconsin. Channeling faculty, staff, and students into shared governance spaces delimits how grievances can be aired and compromises the imagining of alternative configurations of power, such as collective bargaining, that would necessitate re-thinking the political valences of academic work.

What this analysis suggests is that shared governance is not just a site of collaborative decision-making, but also a rhetorical strategy for placing boundaries around the social imagination of the university. This helps to explain, in part, why shared governance does not recognize graduate workers; by representing it as the official channel for institutional decision-making, administrators delegitimize more explicitly labor-focused rhetorics. Shared governance rhetorics erase graduate labor in university discourses and produce greater obstacles to graduate workers' discursive claims to rights that rely on being seen by the university writ large as workers. At the same time, extending my analysis from the previous chapter, the rhetoric of graduate labor exposes the artificial rhetorical boundaries drawn around shared governance by calling into question *who*, exactly, is defined as a shared governance participant and, moreover, who gets to construct such definitions. As I demonstrate in my case study, the TAA's attempts to weigh in on their campaign at a Faculty Senate meeting were met with resistance from both administrators and faculty, suggesting that there are distinct limits to discursive consciousness-raising efforts among graduate workers in institutionally-sanctioned spaces.

Taken together, we can see how the *topos* of shared governance and other arenas of decision-making and power-sharing suppress or otherwise obscure consciousness-raising efforts that might recognize university governance as a site of class conflict. As Chancellor Blank's email evidences, the *topos* of shared governance reinforces the boundaries, determined by administrators and the Board of Regents, of acceptable institutional decision-making procedures. As an institutionalized body, shared governance is rhetorically situated as a deliberative arena where all participants can meaningfully contribute, even as shared governance has undergone extreme transformations. Its ongoing rhetorical significance for administrators and conservative legislators lies in its capacity to further tilt the balance of decision-making power away from faculty, workers, and students. Yet to a faculty body accustomed to certain decision-making privileges, and to a professional organization (AAUP) whose *raison d'être* has been faculty participation in governance, shared governance remains a site of possibility. Because of such attachments, shared governance can more smoothly facilitate the alignment of non-administrative publics with neoliberal prerogatives.

Analyzed rhetorically, the history of shared governance at Wisconsin reveals underlying common motivations between administrators and legislators in clearing the way for unobstructed avenues to enacting administrative prerogative at the expense of genuine decision-making power-sharing. Indeed, despite the partisan political division between administrators and legislators, the interests of both have been served by conservative efforts to defang shared governance as neoliberal rationality asserts its singular sovereignty over the university's decision-making priorities. That shared governance continues to circulate in the popular imagination crystallizes some of the enduring rhetorical utility of the *topos* of shared governance for administrators and legislators. Given the legacy both of shared governance at the University

of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Idea—that “education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom”—which circulate broadly and are celebrated in UW discourses, the deployment of the *topos* of shared governance continues to invite publics into its institutional practice.³⁰ This allows administrators to exploit asymmetries of meaning to ensure a relatively uncontested decision-making process that abides overwhelmingly by neoliberal rationality—on top of divesting energy and resources from pursuing alternative avenues of redress, like contract negotiations.

In the next section, I rhetorically analyze the resolution brought before the UW–Madison Faculty Senate in support of the TAA’s campaign and the subsequent conversation. I pay attention to moments where decision-making powers are indirectly invoked or affirmed to trace how the different actors in that space—administrators, faculty, and graduate workers—enact particular orientations or attitudes regarding others’ rights to lay claim to decision-making authority in that space. I stay mindful of the material constraints at Wisconsin on shared governance as a consequential decision-making body. I conclude this chapter by imagining how working-class counterpublics might more effectively engage with the *topos* of shared governance and decision-making in the neoliberal university.

TAA Interventions in Faculty Senate

At the end of the Faculty Senate meeting on May 7, 2018, a warm day in a poorly-ventilated lecture hall, Professor Kurt Paulson introduced to the Faculty Senate Faculty Document 2756, titled “Resolution on Payment of Mandatory Fees by Graduate Assistants” (hereafter just “Resolution 2756” or “the resolution”).³¹ In consultation with TAA leaders,

³⁰ “The Wisconsin Idea,” UW–Madison La Follette School of Public Affairs, 2022, <https://lafollette.wisc.edu/about/the-wisconsin-idea>.

³¹ “Resolution.”

Professor Chad Alan Goldberg, the then-president of the UW–Madison faculty union, had drafted Resolution 2756 as part of an effort to garner faculty support and attention to the issue of financial hardship for graduate workers. This was likely part of the TAA’s strategy in bringing a resolution to Faculty Senate—win sympathetic faculty members to side with the union, and against university decision-making processes, in its campaign for mandatory fee relief through official university channels.

Interestingly, the resolution begins with a Whereas clause that restates the amended language of Act 55, before identifying the value that graduate workers provide to the educational and research missions of the university:

WHEREAS the faculty have the primary responsibility for advising the Chancellor regarding academic and educational activities (Act 55, 36.09[4]);
WHEREAS equitable working conditions attract and retain talented and experienced graduate assistants and enable them to fulfill their professional responsibilities more effectively, thereby promoting the quality of undergraduate education;
WHEREAS the faculty depend on the contributions of graduate assistants to fulfill effectively our own professional responsibilities³²

On the one hand, the foregrounding of this language in the opening Whereas clause serves to establish the faculty’s jurisdiction within Faculty Senate (“advising the Chancellor regarding academic and educational activities”), which offers an explanation for how what follows—advocacy of financial relief for graduate workers—falls within the purview of the Senate. These clauses establish this resolution as a logical chain of factual statements, foregrounding rational deliberation as the latent (and occasionally explicit) governing mode of the Senate body.

³² Ibid.

The Resolution follows standard resolution formatting: a series of clauses beginning with the phrase “Whereas” that serve to establish preconditional knowledge, and concluding with clauses beginning “Resolved” that compel the audience of the resolution to take action. In the case of Resolution 2756, there were nine Whereas clauses and two Resolved clauses.

At the same time, this language illuminates how shared governance participants play an active role in reinforcing and fixing the boundaries and rhetorical enactment of shared governance relations. In this case, it is not the Wisconsin legislature or the UW administration that identifies the subservient role of Faculty Senate, but faculty senators themselves. This language reinforces and reifies the asymmetrical relation of power between faculty members and administrators; the authority of the faculty paradoxically relies on its acquiescence to the legal rules of shared governance that subsume their authority to the Chancellor. Of course, this can just as easily be read as a strategic rhetorical move wherein the faculty reify the academic hierarchy so as to establish their legitimacy in this venue. But by stating the discursive boundaries of the deliberative arena of shared governance, the faculty identify their willingness to accede to the governing logics of shared governance, which has repercussions in how both administrators and faculty later handle the TAA's attempts to include power-sharing in decision-making in the resolution's "Resolved" clauses.

The following five Whereas clauses of Resolution 2756 pivot to foregrounding the new payment deadline policy, appealing to a sense of injustice at both the effects of the policy and how the policy was determined:

WHEREAS past university policy has permitted graduate workers to pay mandatory fees after receipt of their third paycheck each semester;

WHEREAS new university policy would require graduate workers to pay mandatory fees at the beginning of the semester, before their first paycheck, severely exacerbating the economic burden placed on them;

WHEREAS graduate workers were not involved in the discussion of this policy as it was conceived, contrary to shared-governance principles promoted by the university

WHEREAS graduate students have conveyed their opposition to the changes proposed by the Bursar's Office through a petition signed by over a thousand graduate students and university-affiliated allies, including a third of all graduate workers;

WHEREAS current mandatory fee policies already place an undue burden on graduate workers, accumulating to at least 10.4% of the typical non-dissertator graduate workers' income;³³

These Whereas clauses work somewhat counter to the first three; rather than evidencing reasoned and measured responses, the resolution invites recognition of the indignity of the unilateral administrative decision, with language like “severely exacerbating” and “undue burden” serving to present graduate workers as sympathetic subjects. And yet, to an administrative audience that neither recognizes graduate student workers within shared governance nor has proven itself committed to genuine shared governance principles, and in a venue whose rhetorical boundaries calls for reasoned arguments rooted in professional expertise, these clauses are rendered illegible in the conversation that follows. As Goodwin et al contend, it is the biopolitical health of the university, not individual experiences of hardship or indignity, that determines the university's trajectory.³⁴ Within the space of Faculty Senate, appeals to emotion and to a sense of injustice do not fully register, given the expectation that this is a space where collaboration, not confrontation, predominates.

Further, the Whereas clause identifying the indignity of graduate workers not being consulted in the decision situates graduate workers under the umbrella of “shared-governance principles.” It is the only Whereas clause that relates to the decision-making processes of the fee payment deadline, taking for granted that graduate workers are participants in shared governance. And yet, the history of graduate workers organizing as workers has rarely seen them treated willingly as shared governance participants; only under the threat of strike or other labor

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Phillip Goodwin, Katrina Miller, and Catherine Chaput, “Accountable to Whom? The Rhetorical Circulation of Neoliberal Discourse and Its Ambient Effects on Higher Education,” in *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, ed. Kim Hong Nguyen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15–37.

struggles—in other words, by *probing* antagonisms, not muting them—were graduate workers meaningfully engaged with participatory parity in institutional decision-making. That the Faculty Senate resolution identifies graduate workers vis-a-vis shared governance principles—contrary to the historical reality of the TAA’s relationship to the University—suggests an obfuscation, advanced by both members of the TAA and of Faculty Senate, of the political grounds on which shared governance rests. This informs the unstated discursive presuppositions circulating in the following discussion on the resolution in which members of Faculty Senate bracket power differentials and proceed to debate through reasoned and logical deliberation.

Following the Whereas clauses, the first Resolved clause of Resolution 2756, fully bolded, commends administrators and other high-ranking university officials for their hard work in resolving the issues of graduate worker financial hardship. The clause reads,

Therefore, be it RESOLVED that the UW–Madison Faculty Senate commends and encourages the ongoing efforts taken by the Chancellor, the UW-Madison Graduate School, and the UW System Board of Regents toward an equitable resolution of these problems.³⁵

After Whereas clauses that could potentially be read as antagonistic or critical of administrative decision-making, this first Resolved clause reasserts both obedience to decorum and goodwill to the resolution’s latent administrative audience; underneath this resolution is an unwillingness to be seen as “at odds” with university administrators. The deferential language of “commend[ing] and encourag[ing] the ongoing efforts” of administrators erases the role that sustained pressure from TAA members, including the in-person rally a month and a half prior (detailed in the previous chapter) and a petition, had on administrative action over the fee payment deadline.

³⁵ Ibid.

In the original resolution, both Resolved clauses are written in Bold, drawing the eye to these clauses first and foremost.

Further, this Resolved clause situates UW administrators and the Board of Regents as those resolving “these problems,” without acknowledging either that the problems originated as a result of such consolidated administrative decision-making processes or that the problem may have been avoided had affected stakeholders been meaningfully consulted from the outset. This move to appease administrators after a string of critical Whereas clauses also serves to erase other stakeholders as consequential actors in determining the policies governing graduate workers’ working conditions, undermining the TAA’s capacity to be recognized as such.

The second and final Resolved clause contains the resolution’s four asks, a long list that Faculty Senate “respectfully advise[d]” the Chancellor to undertake:

Be it further RESOLVED that the UW–Madison Faculty Senate respectfully advises the Chancellor to extend these efforts as follows: 1) ensure that the UW–Madison Bursar’s Office and other administrators consult with graduate worker representatives, chosen by graduate workers, before making changes to graduate worker payment policy that would increase the economic burden placed upon them; 2) allow graduate workers to pay mandatory fees after receipt of their third paycheck each semester and promote the revision of University of Wisconsin System Policy 805 to codify this practice; 3) take steps toward a policy of full remission of mandatory fees for all graduate workers at UW–Madison, as soon as practicable, with the university funding said remission, and without raising mandatory fees for undergraduate students or deflecting the costs of remission to departments or employing units; and 4) provide the Faculty Senate with an update next academic year on progress toward a policy of full remission of mandatory fees. ³⁶

These four asks are interrelated, yet each has its own implications for the relationship between administrators, faculty, and graduate workers. The first and second asks, ensuring consultation with graduate worker representatives as chosen by graduate workers and amending UW System Policy 805, would have legitimized the TAA as a consequential partner in institutional governance, a position that the administration was neither obligated to acknowledge nor interested in granting to the union. Indeed, this ask, while seemingly harmless or

³⁶ Ibid.

commonsensical, would actually have served to rehabilitate, however tepidly, a functioning sense of workplace democracy in which graduate workers were, at the very least, consulted in issues affecting their material conditions. This ask, as I will show in the following section, is quickly and expertly settled by Chancellor Blank in a “rhetorically savvy” manner that goes by unremarked-upon, yet that prevents a greater conversation about institutional decision-making powers.

The third and fourth asks—that the Chancellor begin to work toward a policy of full remission of mandatory fees for all graduate workers and that the Chancellor updates the Faculty Senate on its progress—signal a shift in the aspirations of the resolution from one that can broadly be understood as concerning decision-making to one concerned with a much larger and more consequential shift in the material conditions of graduate workers, an aspiration that can be seen as cutting into the university’s neoliberal funding model. For reasons that will be made plain below, these asks are the subject of the most debate in the subsequent Faculty Senate discussion, yet they are also asks that have no genuine ability to be resolved in the institutional arena of Faculty Senate.

Taken together, these four asks are a conspicuously ambitious suite of efforts. Through Resolution 2756, the TAA aimed at recapturing some semblance of democratic workplace governance and relieving financial hardships for graduate workers. Anticipating that administrators would not look favorably upon these recommendations and knowing that shared governance did not have robust enforcement mechanisms, TAA members may have been looking simply to educate faculty members on the conditions of graduate workers and win them to take a more combative stance toward administrative decision-making priorities. Indeed, these aims brought with them the possibility of surfacing certain antagonisms between administrative

decision-making and faculty and graduate workers that had the potential to move the discussion in a more fraught and overtly political direction, one in which members of Faculty Senate might be required to take positions that counteracted administrative ambitions.

The Absence of Decision-Making Rhetorics in Faculty Senate

It is no surprise, then, that the discussion on May 7, 2018 does not go as perhaps TAA members had anticipated. As soon as the resolution is introduced by Professor Kurt Paulson, Chancellor Blank interjects to clarify that the second issue, around the fee payment deadline, was being taken up by the Board of Regents:

Chancellor Blank: Can I be clear about this? This is a policy from the system, from—and the Board of Regents. If I'm going to say this accurately—correct me if I'm inaccurate—has agreed that they will take this up at their next meeting and correct it so that that problem of having to pay fees before your first paycheck will go away. Is that an accurate statement, Lauren?

Lauren Trepanier: Yeah.

Chancellor Blank: And we have a verbal commitment they will take this up the next meeting. It is obviously not yet done.³⁷

Here, Blank quickly moves to resolve the least onerous of the four asks from Resolution 2756, indicating that the UW Board of Regents would be moving to amend the policy that dictated payment deadlines for graduate workers. In so doing, Blank prevents further discussion on the first ask of the resolution—the way in which the decision was made at the Bursar's office—which circumvents a discussion that could surface concerns over workplace decision-making and

³⁷ “Transcription of Faculty Senate Minutes 2018-05-07,” May 7, 2018, https://kb.wisc.edu/images/group222/shared/2018-05-07FacultySenate/2018-05-07_Transcription.

basic democratic rights. Indeed, at no point in the discussion is the issue of consulting with graduate worker representatives re-introduced; in effect, the question of workplace democracy and decision-making for graduate workers never enters the arena. This, to echo Rai, is “raw power...and rhetorical savvy,” as Blank has both the sense and the institutional authority to quickly remove questions of power-sharing from the discussion, with no one in the room any the wiser.³⁸

Following this intervention, Terry Warfield, a member of the University Committee (the Faculty Senate’s executive board), introduces a motion to postpone the resolution until the Faculty Senate’s October meeting five months later. He addresses that better support for graduate students doesn’t necessarily have to come through mandatory fee relief, but instead through increased stipends:

Over the last four years, stipends have gone up in the range of four- to five-thousand dollars over the last five years, well in excess of the increases in the seg fees over that period...UC [University Committee] supports better financial aid for our graduate students either as PA or RA stipends. And we think a better way forward is to continue to work on that. And that is being worked on...[W]hether you increase support by remitting the seg fees or whether you increase support by growing stipends, there are a number of administration issues around that including taxability. And that's being explored too. And so, I think we should let that process play out and then we can come back and see where we stand in the fall.³⁹

³⁸ Candice Rai, “Power, Publics, and the Rhetorical Uses of Democracy,” in *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement.*, ed. John Ackerman and David Coogan, 2013, 40.

³⁹ Ibid.

Warfield exercises the passive voice—“that is being worked on...that’s being explored too”—when discussing the active decision-making processes around financial remuneration for graduate workers. Decision-making is evacuated entirely from the space of Faculty Senate, ostensibly the “chief governance body” where decisions such as these might have been made under different power-sharing arrangements, and instead situated in nameless and faceless processes and subject-less proclamations. By advocating to “let that process play out and then we can come back and see where we stand in the fall,” Warfield attempts to cut off the conversation entirely, in effect relegating faculty senators and graduate workers to passive bystanders of the decision-making process. In this reading of the proceedings, Warfield’s rhetorical efforts to slow down the process of voting on the resolution from his position on the Faculty Senate’s University Committee underscores how decision-making is evacuated from the shared governance space and placed in the hands of people closer to the administrative core of the university.

Warfield’s intervention and motion to table the proposal until October occupies a significant remainder of the meeting. Following Warfield’s motion to table, Faculty Senate agrees by unanimous consent to allow TAA members to speak to the resolution. But because of parliamentary procedure, members were only allowed to speak on the matter of whether or not Faculty Senate should postpone voting on the resolution. This meant that the testimonies from graduate workers about financial hardships, shared by TAA members in attendance, were frequently ruled “out of order” by Chancellor Blank. Even so, TAA members attempted to make these testimonies germane to the urgency of garnering faculty support for mandatory fee relief:

Daniel Hast: Thank you all for being here and for giving us the opportunity to speak and to speak in particular about the urgency of this issue, and so why I strongly urge you not to table this motion...[To] really emphasize sort of the urgency of this issue and why I

think it would be a mistake to table this motion and delay until later, until after the summer, I want to read a few stories that the TAA collected from the graduate workers about the--

Chancellor Blank: I'm going to rule that out of order. That is not related to the immediate tabling motion...

Daniel Hast: I believe this is germane because it explains why this issue is urgent and shouldn't be tabled. I am speaking to the issue of not tabling the motion.⁴⁰

Hast was allowed by Blank to read one testimony from an anonymous graduate worker, but this exchange exemplifies how the TAA's strategy to garner support from sympathetic faculty members in the space of Faculty Senate relied on appeals to sympathy that were ultimately discounted both for their heavy-handed attempts at drawing on faculty members' emotions and for not attending to the agreed-upon ground rules of the proceedings. I do not mean to suggest here that Blank was wrong for calling these stories out of order given parliamentary procedure or even that these procedures are inherently inhospitable; rather, I am arguing that the TAA's pursuit of a strategy rooted in emotional appeals failed to account for the procedural wrangling by which Faculty Senate meetings at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, in particular, are conducted: for one, having as the chair of the meeting the Chancellor, the singular person through whom many of these decisions pass through on their way to becoming discarded or codified. Furthermore, this strategy situated TAA members not as stakeholders entitled to relative participatory parity in decision-making—as the TAA has historically situated itself—but rather as sympathetic figures worthy of the university's beneficence. This move arguably reified the academic pecking order that previous TAA campaigns had railed against.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

For another, the TAA's rhetorical appeals took for granted that faculty at UW appreciated the urgency of the issue. Indeed, as the conversation turns to the need for urgency in garnering faculty support, one faculty member in Computer Science laments the rush to come to a decision so soon, insinuating that the TAA members in attendance are prioritizing emotion over logic:

I didn't hear the voice that says that during the summer, the graduate students are going to collapse because of the need to wait until the resolution in October. And I don't see why waiting until October and passing the correct resolution [that] would solve the problem [in] the best possible way is detrimental to the present life of the graduate student. And for that reason, I second the motion [to table voting on the resolution]...Our graduate student[s] are rushing out to rush and to vote with our heart instead of with our brain and we need to express logic. And not to say, "We are emotional about it and we are so supportive of that and we will unconditionally—I'm going to support everything that you say without thinking about whether we are helping in this way our graduate students."⁴¹

The explicit invocation here of appealing to logic over emotion states the unstated norm of Faculty Senate, and indeed of most shared governance bodies of the university system—that rational deliberation is the only recognized mode of discourse therein, and that logic has primacy above emotion. This masks both the affective entanglements of shared governance processes—how the *topos* of shared governance circulates and takes root in sensing, feeling bodies—and the ways in which privileging logic can perpetuate neoliberal paeans to the rational indifference of the "free market." Further, this faculty member's equation of TAA members with emotion and faculty and administrators with logic serves to justify the unequal distribution of decision-

⁴¹ Ibid.

making powers, as if to say that graduate workers cannot be trusted to share in institutional decision-making because they will introduce emotional appeals into the process. In all, the often-unstated norm of rational deliberation in shared governance positions TAA members' rhetorical appeals indecorous and out of order.

Ultimately, the decision to postpone the vote on the resolution is shot down, and debate continues. Professor Kathryn McGarr from the School of Journalism then speaks, relaying that faculty in her department voted to support the spirit of the resolution, but that they struck out the third and fourth asks (moving toward full fee relief and giving Faculty Senate an update). This prompts a call to amend the resolution by striking out points three and four, which is seconded. At this point, the issue centers on the prescriptiveness of the language around where the money would come from; Laurent Heller, Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, notes:

I do think this language is very particular and prescriptive about budget in a way that may not be fully implementable for us. We've got some feedback from legal counsel here on campus and also from system that fee remission as described is actually not legal for us to do. That doesn't mean that we can't find ways to make this work but in general I think the super prescriptive nature of point three there does create problems for us in administration, so I would be supportive of some sort of tweak to that that would make it easier for us to work on the issue.⁴²

Heller's intimation that the prescriptions offered in the resolution are "actually not legal for us to do" makes it appear as though administrators are interested in responding to the TAA's concerns. And yet, the dissonance between that language and the reality of TAA-administrator relations (or student government-administrator relations) suggests that such conciliatory language is more

⁴² Ibid.

a discursive maneuver to quell claims that administrators do not listen or act in the interests of faculty, students, or workers.

Soon after, Blank calls for a vote to amend the resolution and announces that the meeting no longer has quorum—there are not enough voting members according to the Faculty Senate procedural guidelines. At that point, the resolution is indefinitely tabled.

What this reading of Resolution 2756 and the proceedings of the subsequent discussion at Faculty Senate suggest is that the issue of decision-making powers—who has it, who doesn't—constitutes a latent charge running through governance proceedings, even when unrecognized or unacknowledged by participants. Moreover, this reading suggests that there remains an asymmetry of meaning in how shared governance and its enforcement capabilities are understood; its rhetorical deployment by Faculty Senate participants points not to a singular understanding of shared governance, but rather multiple understandings based on its rhetorical utility at that moment. In attempting to win support from faculty members through shared governance proceedings, TAA members were inattentive to how governance in the neoliberal university entangles with the ongoing concentration of decision-making power in administrators. This meant that the TAA was fundamentally unable to contest normative assumptions about decision-making powers that have been absorbed into and naturalized in the discursive functioning of shared governance bodies. It also meant that the TAA failed to elevate its own ideals and principles of workplace democracy and the redistribution of decision-making power.

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to demonstrate how academic labor unions compromise their function as a vehicle for working-class power when they fail to contest the terms and processes of decision-making in the neoliberal university. To do this, I explored a

moment where TAA members, faculty members, and administrators met in a shared governance body to debate issues of material concern to graduate workers. Though this meeting ended without quorum, there were later Faculty Senate meetings in which the issue of financial relief for graduate workers was again raised. Given space to do so, much more could have been written about those meetings, including one seven months later in which a new version of the above resolution did pass. Further, more could be written about the affective entanglements within and attachments to the Faculty Senate space and to shared governance as an institution—how shared governance, along with the Wisconsin Idea, animate and activate bodies yearning for some semblance of good-faith negotiation between actors across extreme power differentials.

What I hope this chapter did offer, however, is a compelling case study of how control over decision-making, an issue that has been at the heart of so much scholarship over the decades on social change and social justice, is presently defined by extreme power asymmetries and a rhetorical terrain overdetermined discursively by the prerogatives of those in power. Further, I hope I demonstrated how administrators exploit the fundamental ambivalence of the concept of shared governance to set rhetorical boundaries around university decision-making and divide those who might otherwise find common cause and imagine alternative possibilities. To be clear, what I am not saying in this chapter is that all decision-making power should be given to graduate workers, or even to faculty, or that this redistribution would necessarily result in a more equitable campus—Candice Rai and Ralph Cintron compellingly argue that democracy is not *a priori* righteous.⁴³ Rather, I am suggesting, in a neoliberal public sphere defined by extreme

⁴³ Cintron, “Democracy,” 104; Candice Rai, “Power, Publics, and the Rhetorical Uses of Democracy,” in *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement.*, ed. John Ackerman and David Coogan, 2013, 43.

power asymmetries and an uneven rhetorical terrain, that vehicles for building working-class power not lose sight of ways that decision-making power-sharing remains central to their project.

This case study offers a counterexample of working-class counterpublicity, a moment when class-conscious discourses were muted by institutional pressures and actors, a moment when graduate workers struggled to build solidarity with faculty members premised on a shared understanding of the limitations of university decision-making power-sharing. It offers important cautions for organized labor as it engages with employers—a relationship that is unlikely to drastically change anytime soon. It brings up for me the question of the political horizon of institutional forums of decision-making: is there any hope for working-class counterpublics to use shared governance as a site of working-class empowerment? What this case study suggests is that class relations in all their entanglements remain an obstacle to organizing against the neoliberal trajectory of the American university system, and also that institutionalized governance bodies can harden allegiances rather than break them down.

Conclusion

Labor's Futures and the Role of Rhetoric

I began the process of writing this dissertation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For a moment, it looked as though workers were finally getting their due—alongside a short-lived “clap for frontline workers” phenomenon, worksites from grocery stores to hospitals implemented increased hazard pay rates. Workers successfully pressured their supervisors to allow indefinite remote-work options, provide personal protective equipment, and invest in quality air filtration systems. In a remarkably short time, the nation developed an increased awareness of the precarity of workers and their importance to the processes that constitute daily life in the United States. In this period of crisis, Americans experienced firsthand the malleability of supposedly “immutable” and “natural” capitalist laws that seemed otherwise immovable in periods of calm—the American government both offered direct cash assistance to eligible citizens and paused student loan payment requirements, among other measures. This recent fissure in hegemonic capitalist ideology may suggest that capitalist ideology is in the process of splitting, with the potential for new types of political subjectivities to arise. And yet, as I have invoked throughout this dissertation through the work of Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Dana Cloud, and others, revolutionary class consciousness is not a given, nor is social transformation a guarantor of liberation or revolution. Indeed, social strife can always lead, and frequently has led, to disaster. But the capacity to produce alternative social and political relations that elevate the myriad voices of the *demos* in decision-making runs throughout the long history of labor organizing.

For over fifty years, graduate workers have insisted that what they do is work. Like industrial unions of the past, they have insisted on the right to make decisions affecting their working conditions and in some cases have advocated for measures that extend beyond their immediate worksites. In some historical moments, organizers have found the environment favorable to such demands; in others, the window has narrowed. Indeed, as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, class consciousness waxes and wanes as political, economic, and social conditions change. In the 1970s, persuading graduate workers at Wisconsin to join a project rooted in transforming the very operation of the university was possible precisely because of the particular institutional and social conditions at the time—the antiwar fervor on UW–Madison’s campus, the 1969 Black Student Strike, the nationwide demands around ethnic studies programs on college campuses. Conversely, in the late 2010s, the aftereffects of Wisconsin’s Act 10 legislation, the ongoing neoliberalization of the university, and a decades-long decline in class consciousness and labor organizing impeded the work of TAA organizers. As conditions change, workers’ ideas change—ideas concerning what is possible, what is impossible, and what is necessary. Rhetorical studies has much to contribute to better understanding this process.

Even as labor unions struggle to organize in moments of low class consciousness, what endures from a rhetorical perspective is a transhistorical thread of political and intellectual thought, a body of knowledge, that sees the organized working class as an agent of revolutionary social change. This intellectual tradition imagines as a possible future the end of capitalism and a transition to common ownership over productive processes and public goods, part of the legacy and tradition of what philosopher Alain Badiou calls “the Idea of communism.”¹ As I understand

¹ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran, Paperback edition (London New York: Verso, 2015).

it, the Idea of communism occasions the process by which the individual subject who belongs to a specific, place-bound political order (i.e. a labor union or political party) taps into the transhistorical, non-place-bound *topos* of communist thought that marks the subject as an agential actor in history. Read rhetorically, the Idea of communism animates human activity through the production and cultivation of particular political and historical subjectivities. Badiou's mediation between the material-political and discursive-symbolic realms complements the project in rhetorical studies—initiated by Aune, Cloud, and others and to which I contribute here—by identifying the interplay between class-conscious discourses, history, and the concrete relations of workers in motion. These ideas are buttressed by the definition of rhetoric that I offered at the beginning of this dissertation: the study of how discourses gather intensity in the material world, relating to and embedding in it through affective encounters. Thus, even as the time- and place-bound forms of working-class organization change and adapt based on social conditions, the rhetorical energy generated by the working-class political tradition endures, to embed in future, unforeseen relations and forms of organization. My hope is that this dissertation's examination of the interactions between class-conscious discourses and people in the world contributes, in however small a manner, to the tradition beyond rhetorical studies that has as its goal what Badiou calls "Humanity's forward march toward its collective emancipation."²

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. I am not saying that there are no discernible differences between working-class politics in theory and working-class organization in fact. In reality, working-class organizations have proven to be just as susceptible to the perils that threaten all institutions or organizations: discrimination, sexual harassment and assault,

² Ibid, 236.

xenophobia, top-down decision-making, cliquishness, and more. These are real issues that must be addressed through rank-and-file workers' struggles for greater transparency, survivor-oriented grievance procedures, and democratic decision-making, like the struggle for union reform that Dana Cloud recounts in *We Are The Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing*.³ These are ideals that must be debated and puzzled over by regular workers—whether conservative, liberal, revolutionary, or non-partisan—as they chart the path forward and as conditions change; as famed socialist and trade unionist Eugene V. Debs said, “if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are... You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition.”⁴ Historical, time- and place-bound examples of the radical potential of working-class organizations abound, from the workers' councils of the Russian Revolution to the multiracial Communist Party USA to the Mondragon Corporation worker cooperative in Spain. While the political conditions in the United States over the past forty years have negatively affected how major American labor unions go about their daily work, the working class remains a pivotal player in the struggle against capitalism.

As universities become increasingly beholden to the demands of global capital, sacrificing many of their strengths as public goods and as incubators for publicly-supported and widely-beneficial research, the academic labor movement has an essential role to play to alter the trajectory of the university system and fundamentally reimagine university decision-making.

Historian Daniel Gilbert contends that graduate employee unionists constitute the leading edge of

³ Dana L. Cloud, *We Are the Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

⁴ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2007), 244.

public intellectual work that is reshaping how we understand academic labor and knowledge production. Gilbert points to graduate employees' relationships with industrial unions on campus and their mobilizations in the Occupy movement, including the TAA's leadership in the 2011 Act 10 protests, as evidence that there is "power and promise [in] intellectuals working and organizing as parts of larger publics."⁵ Speaking of student movements more broadly, of which graduate labor unions play a part, Roderick Ferguson writes that intersectional demands for racial, economic, environmental, and gender justice "represent an insistence on a new social order, a fundamental change in social relations."⁶ The transformation of the university from a site of competition and market-driven solutions to one of collaboration and equitable relations across difference rests on the ability for the academic labor movement to join forces and be in solidarity with other movements, student- and community-led, as they shape demands and influence university decision-making.

Contributions to Rhetorical Studies

With this dissertation, I have made an argument about the role of rhetoric in graduate workers' campaigns for access to university decision-making arenas, arguing that class-conscious rhetorics of decision-making mediate the experiences of graduate workers in the university system and contribute to the formation of working-class counterpublics. I have also argued that the rhetorical formation of the contemporary neoliberal university has contributed to an absence of class-conscious discourses that might otherwise apprehend the situation facing academic labor. With three case studies, I showed how class-conscious rhetorics of graduate

⁵ Daniel A. Gilbert, "The Generation of Public Intellectuals: Corporate Universities, Graduate Employees and the Academic Labor Movement," *Labor Studies Journal* 38, no. 1 (March 2013), 38.

⁶ Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 4.

labor and decision-making are central to understanding the balance of power between university workers and administrations, as these rhetorics are vulnerable to obfuscation and require ongoing vigilance by both graduate workers and administrative decision-makers. In Chapter Two, I identified how the TAA actively constructed a graduate worker identity that situated the graduate worker subject within the political economic conditions of the university in the lead-up to the union's 1970 strike for a collective bargaining agreement that included the redistribution of curricular decision-making powers. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated how the TAA's struggle to integrate greater labor consciousness into its rhetorical activity around student fees compounded its difficulty in cohering a durable working-class counterpublic capable of withstanding administrative rhetorics and tactics. In Chapter Four, I analyzed how the *topos* of shared governance circulates rhetorically with assumptions that do not match its material and juridical reality, thus providing rhetorical cover for administrators to maintain decision-making power over key facets of university operations. The rhetorics of decision-making from a working-class standpoint expose the rhetorical boundaries of the university's governance practices; they offer one avenue through which to challenge the university's assent to neoliberal, free-market principles by undermining the logics naturalizing administrative decision-making.

"The University Works Because We Do" contributes to rhetorical studies in important ways. First, it adds to the work of rhetorical scholars committed to better understanding how the prevailing class system of contemporary American society variously enables and constrains rhetorical activity, in the workplace or in the public sphere. Scholars in this tradition, like James Arnt Aune, Dana Cloud, Nancy Welch, Catherine Chaput, and others, have integrated key contributions from Marxist thinkers into rhetorical studies while maintaining both a deep level of understanding of Marxism's strengths and weaknesses and a principled commitment to working-

class politics and emancipation. This dissertation, in particular, extends the work of Dana Cloud, who first identified Georg Lukács' theory of working-class standpoint as offering a heuristic for rhetorical understandings of class consciousness-raising. By applying working-class standpoint theory to, specifically, the rhetorical activity of a labor union, I bring to the field a more nuanced understanding of how workers articulate shared experiences of exclusion from decision-making.

Second, this dissertation updates rhetoric scholars' understanding of the rhetorical regime of the neoliberal university by attending to its circulating labor rhetorics. Scholars like Nancy Welch, Tony Scott, Marc Bousquet, and others that straddle the line between Rhetoric and Composition have made similar arguments about labor in the university system, and I contribute to these conversations by identifying the rhetorical activity of, specifically, graduate worker-organizers as key to challenging hegemonic public understandings of the university's purpose and function. Especially in a field that relies largely on graduate labor for the fulfillment of its teaching mission, attending to the rhetorics of graduate labor integrates traditional working-class knowledges and tactics into university spaces that have largely suppressed or avoided class-conscious rhetorics. Contestation of the rhetorics of graduate labor circulating in the university can contribute to the formation of a working-class counterpublic that translates discursive resistance to material opposition, in the form of concerted workplace activity. While not guaranteeing success, such opposition can over time change the rhetorical landscape in ways that offer alternative futures for the modern American research university.

Finally, I see this dissertation as a contribution to rhetorical studies' ongoing interest in rhetorics of social change. As I have identified in this project, the working class exists as more than an object of study; it is, when organized, capable of bringing capitalist productive processes to a grinding halt and ushering in new modes of governance and production in which everyone

shares in the profits of labor. However, workers' rhetorics have remained marginalized in academic study for many, complicated reasons. Continuing the thread of scholarship that, as much as possible without wistful nostalgia, takes workers' rhetorics seriously allows me to shine new light onto an avenue of social change that has been underdeveloped in rhetorical studies.

Limitations and Paths Forward

This dissertation has limitations, as all projects of this scope do. First, my identity as a white, cisgender, able-bodied male from an upper-middle-class income background with a post-graduate education may limit my credibility as a scholar studying workers' rhetorical activity. Even as I have remained mindful of engrained biases throughout the process of producing this dissertation, I cannot but write from this positionality, which inevitably leads to oversights and omissions in my work.

Second, and relatedly, the rhetorics of graduate labor in the university must contend with issues of representation, something I only deal with briefly in this project. As Robert Rhoads and Gary Rhoades lay out in their study of graduate employee unionization, graduate union leaders are more likely to be white and from middle-class-and-above backgrounds; they are mostly equally split between men and women.⁷ While these demographic notes track with data around who is able to afford and attend graduate school in the first place on account of cost and available financial support, they nonetheless complicate how graduate worker unions and theories of graduate labor understand the complicated interplay between race, gender, income, higher education, and labor in decision-making spaces. I take heart in the work done by striking graduate workers at the University of Michigan in fall 2020, who included in their platform

⁷ Robert A Rhoads and Gary Rhoades, "Graduate Employee Unionization as Symbol of and Challenge to the Corporatization of U.S. Research Universities," *The Journal of Higher Education* 76, no. 3 (June 2005), 256-257.

intersectional social justice demands including subsidies for student parents and caregivers, greater support for international students, and the diversion of funds from campus police.⁸ Their strike is a prime example of “social justice unionism,” in which unions move beyond immediate workplace issues to advocate for societal concerns, and something of which the academic labor movement needs more. Conversations around the rhetorics of workplace decision-making in academic spaces needs more attention to intersectional social justice demands, while still maintaining at its core the assertion that our shared identification as workers in the university labor system—what I have theorized in this dissertation—is what binds together our collective struggle.

While coalition-building was a regular conversation topic in union strategy meetings I attended, this dissertation does not spend significant time analyzing how the TAA built relationships behind-the-scenes with non-graduate worker audiences. As Karma Chávez points out, social movement scholars have been largely absent from conversations and analyses concerning coalition-building.⁹ Chávez’s book *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* offers a timely corrective to the relative lack of understanding among rhetorical scholars about how rhetors work across affiliations as they engage rhetorically to build campaigns targeted at benefitting multiply-marginalized populations. The scholarship of John Koban on productive dissensus and cooperative land management likewise offers additional avenues for better understanding rhetorical strategies among coalitions working across political

⁸ “GEO Statement Following Work Stoppage Ballot Results: Membership Authorizes Walk-Out over Pandemic and Policing Demands – Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO),” September 7, 2020, <https://www.geo3550.org/2020/09/07/geo-statement-following-work-stoppage-ballot-results-membership-authorizes-walk-out-over-pandemic-and-policing-demands/>.

⁹ Karma R. Chávez, “Counter-Public Enclaves and Understanding the Function of Rhetoric in Social Movement Coalition-Building,” *Communication Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (January 31, 2011), 2.

and ontological difference.¹⁰ While my chapters focus on some of the “behind the scenes” work that Chávez suggests makes this scholarship difficult to produce, I focus primarily on conversations amongst and between graduate workers rather than coalition partners. In the campaigns I participated in with the TAA, coalition-building with faculty, students, other campus workers, and the Madison community was always part of the conversation; with more space in this dissertation, I would have liked to explore the rhetorical processes of coalition-building across the campus and the city.

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I regularly asked myself: am I overstating the situation that graduate workers find themselves in? The danger in doing so is that it would plausibly contribute to the process of “elite capture” by which benefits meant for everyone are disproportionately funneled upward to serve the narrower set of interests of the social elite. As Olúfémi O. Táíwò asserts, elite capture describes how “political projects can be hijacked—in principle or in effect—by the well positioned and resourced.”¹¹ I have no easy answers for this. On the one hand, I believe that matters academic *are* overrepresented in contemporary culture. At the same time, I believe that the conditions of graduate labor are largely misunderstood and sometimes purposely misrepresented, and that the inherent relations of subordination and deference in the academic hierarchy make abuses of power both more common and difficult to act on. As made apparent by a recent high-profile lawsuit alleging that Harvard University ignored serial sexual harassment by a professor, graduate students—especially women, international students, and people of color—are vulnerable to abuse, as

¹⁰ John Koban, “Productive Dissensus: A Theory of Deliberative Rhetoric for Intersovereign Cooperative Management Relationships,” PhD diss., (University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2021).

¹¹ Olúfémi O. Táíwò, “Identity Politics and Elite Capture,” *Boston Review*, May 7, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/olufemi-o-taiwo-identity-politics-and-elite-capture/>.

professors and advisors hold significant power over the future career trajectory and livelihoods of graduate students.¹² The struggle to include graduate workers and other academic workers in decision-making processes can, in small ways, counteract this by elevating marginalized voices and codifying participatory parity into institutional decision-making spaces. Ultimately, these struggles reimagine and reinvent social relations in the academy, in the process transforming relations of power that otherwise seem immutable and inevitable.

One place that this project's limitations around the precarity of graduate workers and coalitional rhetorics may have cohered is in engaging more fully with the literature and material realities of adjunct labor. While graduate labor is by definition temporary, it has clear protections and job security that adjunct instructors, unless organized, do not. The increasing reliance in higher education on adjunct instructors to offer cheap undergraduate instruction complicates how we might think about labor organizing and solidarity across work titles. That is, work on labor organizing and the rhetorics of higher education should pay attention to how the *topoi* of adjuncting circulate to contain graduate worker organizing efforts and legitimize particular academic hierarchies. As Thomas Discenna notes, in the rhetoric of graduate labor organizers, "the adjunct is invoked but never speaks, standing as a nightmare vision for all those who would deny their classification as workers rather than students."¹³ Moreover, reliance on adjunct and graduate labor is intimately entangled with attacks on faculty tenure, the rhetoric of which could fill its own dissertation. With more time for this dissertation, I would have liked to investigate more fully how faculty come to understand and act on the rhetorics of graduate labor,

¹² Anemona Hartocollis, "A Lawsuit Accuses Harvard of Ignoring Sexual Harassment by a Professor," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2022, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/us/harvard-sexual-harassment-lawsuit.html>.

¹³ Thomas Discenna, "Apprenticed or Exploited: Critical Rhetoric and the Yale Grade Strike," PhD diss., (Wayne State University, 2001).

particularly the entanglement between graduate studies, aspirations toward professorship, adjunct labor, and faculty life itself. Nonetheless, the graduate labor movement must make inroads in building lines of solidarity and common cause between adjuncts, faculty, and graduate workers.

The limitations I write about here are not unique to my project, but exist in much of the literature on American labor and American social movements. As organizer adrienne maree brown writes, “we—Americans—don’t know how to do democracy. We don’t know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, how to advance policies that center justice. Most of our movements are reduced to advancing false solutions, things we can get corporate or governmental agreement on, which don’t actually get us where we need to be.”¹⁴ Following brown, I suggest that the building of meaningful and durable relations offers one important corrective—relations across identity categories and across job titles that invest in one another as full, messy humans. Workplace actions, especially those that might lead to discipline or other consequences, require genuine and deep solidarity with other participants, which comes from building relationships rooted in trust and support; as activist Farad Ebrahimi writes, “a given social movement isn’t a list of organizations, or campaigns, or even individuals; it’s the set of relationships *between* organizations, campaigns, individuals.”¹⁵ Indeed, it is helpful to remember that working-class counterpublics are but one among a plurality of counterpublics, each of which might understand itself as forming the nucleus of alternative organizations of society. In examining counterpublic relationality, Miriam Hansen contends that alliances between counterpublics are essential in buttressing against individual counterpublics’ neutralization “in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism or polariz[ation] in a reductive

¹⁴ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 52.

¹⁵ Farad Ebrahimi, quoted in brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 53.

competition of victimization.”¹⁶ The identity of “graduate worker” that I explore in this dissertation is essential to building class consciousness and solidarity but is not the whole of any one person. Placing a premium on relationship-building, both in the academic labor movement and in rhetorical analyses of the movement, can bring the many insights of rhetorical studies to bear on the direction of academic labor organizing.

Further, the graduate labor movement must recognize that explicitly raising the demands of international graduate workers, graduate workers of color, queer graduate workers, and other marginalized groups remains a prerequisite to making connections between various struggles and the building of anti-neoliberal coalitions. While the TAA’s fee campaign analyzed in Chapter Three highlighted the discriminatory facets of the international student fee, we could have done more to center the ways that international graduate students are subjected to pressures unique to their precarious status as international workers that domestic graduate students are not. Moreover, we could have drawn attention to the fact that student fees are not felt evenly across all populations of students. Clear messaging that highlights the intersectional impacts of neoliberal policies remains a necessary feature of graduate worker-organizers’ rhetorical activity.

What’s Next?

From a rhetorical studies perspective, this dissertation can contribute to emerging explorations into workers’ rhetorics. In building on public sphere theory, critical university studies, and rhetorical studies, I make an argument both about the rhetorics of graduate labor and about the role of rhetorics of decision-making in working-class formations, which can inform how the campaigns of workers’ organizations take up the issue of decision-making control. As

¹⁶ Miriam Hansen, foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience*, by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 1972/1993/2016), xxxvii.

debates continue to swirl in K-12 education around the teaching of Critical Race Theory, conversations around who gets to decide curriculum have necessitated that teachers' unions engage with the issue.¹⁷ As greater challenges mount to the conditions of work in education—whether primary, secondary, or higher education—exploration into the rhetorical valences of workplace decision-making will only grow in importance and urgency.

The implications of this dissertation for graduate labor organizing are messy—on the one hand, graduate worker-organizers' loud and redundant claims to worker-ness are necessary to combatting a longstanding historical contention that they are anything but. On the other hand, the label of “worker” alone is clearly insufficient on its own; organizers limit their rhetorical arsenal when they reduce the complexity of their station to claims to worker-ness. They are (graduate) workers and (graduate) students, and each subject position comes with distinct rhetorical affordances and constraints. Future work on the rhetorical valences of graduate labor organizing should consider more thoroughly how the student identity of graduate student workers factors into union considerations. In other words, what are the possibilities (and limitations) that come with leaning into a *student* identity?

Lastly, this dissertation challenges rhetorical scholars to take working-class politics and organizations seriously, both as subjects of our analyses and as agential social actors in their own right. Class analysis has developed a reputation in the academy as passé, or reductive, or unnecessary. So long as this persists, the interests of broad swaths of Americans will remain marginal in our discipline and on our campuses. This dissertation does not claim to be in any sense a definitive exploration of classed rhetorics; as I alluded to in the previous section, there

¹⁷ Madeline Will, “Teachers’ Unions Vow to Defend Members in Critical Race Theory Fight,” *Education Week*, July 6, 2021, sec. Teaching Profession, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-unions-vow-to-defend-members-in-critical-race-theory-fight/2021/07>.

remain limitations to my study that are endemic to any narrowly-focused project. And yet, this dissertation does seek to correct for oversights in and misconceptions about rhetorical studies' engagement with classed rhetorics by demonstrating the value of analytical frames that more explicitly engage with capitalist class relations as a feature of rhetorical activity. In so doing, my hope is that this dissertation contributes to developments in rhetorical studies that affirm the role workers play in social change.

The university system is at a crossroads. As universities have comported themselves to better reflect the needs of the market, their social role has changed. The twin processes of austerity and corporatization have transformed universities into business-like entities that rely on cheap labor, external investment, administrative bloat, and consolidated decision-making powers; put bluntly, they can no longer be trusted to act in the public good. Those of us who work in the academy may feel powerless to halt or reverse this trajectory. And yet, with a labor perspective rooted in collective action and democratic decision-making—and more, with a rhetorical lens through which to discern how university administrations *use* language to undermine workers' claims to decision-making power-sharing—academic workers can undermine top-down discourses that claim to faithfully represent how the university really works. In their place, new social relations premised on more egalitarian ways of being may come into view, may appear as not only possible but, especially in times of heightened consciousness, inevitable.

The future of the labor movement is not etched in stone. It must be open to what Alain Badiou calls “the formal possibility of *other* possibilities, ones as yet unsuspected by us.”¹⁸ Indeed, there is no guarantee that labor unions as currently constituted, especially in the United

¹⁸ Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, 256.

States, will steward any serious and all-encompassing social transformation. In fact, I am confident in saying, alongside American labor scholars Kim Moody, Stanley Aronowitz, and countless others, that the bureaucratic bloat and conservative approach of the biggest and most powerful labor unions—with a heavy-handed, top-down leadership style that seeks stability through collaboration with management and the Democratic Party rather than confrontation—represents an obstacle to the emancipatory potential of working-class political organization.¹⁹ The inspiration I have taken from the Teaching Assistants' Association, a volunteer-run operation of graduate workers that has remained at arms-length from interference by union bureaucrats but that has nonetheless endured as a political force, serves as a potent reminder that the greatest strength of the labor movement is the self-activity of everyday workers, not of those on the union payroll.

My study of the TAA offers insights into how committed Leftists, unionists, and revolutionaries can learn to “fail better,” remaining resolute and integrating tough lessons as struggles continue to evolve. Historian and theorist Enzo Traverso cites the Left's history of defeat and the attendant melancholia that accompanies this history as a condition of possibility for future struggles:

This melancholia does not mean a retreat into a closed universe of suffering and remembering; it is rather a constellation of emotions and feelings that envelop a historical transition, the only way in which the search for new ideas and projects can coexist with the sorrow and mourning for a lost realm of revolutionary experiences.²⁰

¹⁹ Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism*, The Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 1988); Kim Moody, *On New Terrain* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017); Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Worker's Movement* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2015).

²⁰ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xiv.

Put another way, feeling melancholic about the ongoing failures of the Left and of organized labor across time and space does not mean giving into fatalism. Rather, a humble awareness of the dire conditions in which the Left has historically existed for as long as there has been a revolutionary current through working-class political organization offers a way to translate the “lost realm of revolutionary experiences” into new formations and relations.

Surprisingly, researching for and writing this dissertation has left me hopeful about the future of graduate labor organizing and working-class counterpublicity more generally. In January, Columbia University graduate workers reached a contract agreement with administrators after a ten-week strike; the agreement included pay increases, improved dental and healthcare coverage, third-party arbitration for allegations of discrimination or harassment, and more.²¹ And as I write this conclusion in March 2022 in Seattle, Washington, workers at a Starbucks location in Seattle—the coffee giant’s hometown—voted to unionize, the seventh Starbucks location nationwide to do so and the first on the west coast. These actions, while in and of themselves small drops in a worldwide bucket that is teetering on the brink of authoritarianism, keep alive the flame of the working class as a historical actor. Studying the rhetoric of workers’ movements for decision-making control at work and beyond clues rhetoricians into how class-consciousness is formed, transmitted, mediated, and embedded in real-world encounters. This work, while minor, can nonetheless help enact Marx’s famous

²¹ Ashley Wong, “Student Workers at Columbia End 10-Week Strike After Reaching a Deal,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2022, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/nyregion/columbia-student-workers-strike-ends.html>.

challenge: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”²²

²² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, Great Books in Philosophy (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998), 572.

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